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International Council on Social Welfare



Welcome Letter

by Antonio López Peláez, ICSW Executive Director

Dear ICSW members, friends, and interested readers,

Welcome to the August 2026 issue of our newsletter.

August is a very different month depending on the country. In my case, in Spain, it's a month associated with vacations—both for Spaniards and for the millions of tourists who travel to Spain in the summer. This time of rest is crucial for becoming aware of our personal, group, and community realities—and for regaining strength to face the challenges that affect us, (in the case of the ICSW, in the field of social welfare). Decent work is work that includes paid rest periods, ensuring people's well-being.

The articles in this issue of our newsletter focus specifically on the issues of poverty, social protection, insecurity, and precarious working conditions. In his article, our president, Dr. Zelenev, analyzes the right to social protection as an indispensable requirement for guaranteeing human rights and human dignity. Loyal Bou Harfouch, a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, examines what harm reduction can teach us in the realm of public policy, emphasizing that the best social policies should reduce identifiable harms, avoid unnecessary coercion, make disciplined use of public resources, and leave individuals with greater freedom to improve their own circumstances.

Sandra Carla Sarde Mirabelli, president of the ICSW Latin America Region, complements the previous articles with an interesting reflection on the key role that territories play in the realm of social protection: the defense of human rights is built in everyday life, in relationships, and in territories, through the active participation of individuals and communities. Conceição de Maria Goulart Braga Cuba, a professor at UnATI/UERJ, focuses her article on intergenerational solidarity and digital inclusion in a digital society where we must move beyond the “war of the ages” and seek collaboration and mutual support among generations. Finally, in the “Publication in Focus” section, we find an analysis of the 2026 Global Justice Report, which highlights the importance of working toward equity and prosperity through an action plan based on the principles of social justice and global sustainability.

Thanks to these wonderful contributions, our readers can reflect on social protection, harm reduction, the role of local communities, intergenerational solidarity, and strategies to promote justice and well-being. I extend my heartfelt thanks to you for sharing your insightful observations with all ICSW members.

At ICSW, we are committed to doing our very best to improve the well-being of all. In the face of disasters such as those in Nepal, ongoing wars in various parts of the world, and the old and new social vulnerabilities we face every day, it is important to present accurate assessments, precise evaluations, and coping strategies that will help increase social well-being, social justice, and democracy. Our deepest solidarity with the people of Nepal, and with all those who fall outside the social protection systems.

Take care and stay healthy.

Antonio
ICSW Executive Director

President's Corner



Codifying the Right to Universal Social Protection: Are Legally Binding Frameworks the Missing Link?

by Sergei Zelenev, ICSW President

This question goes to the heart of one of the most important debates in contemporary social policy and global governance. We live in a world of extraordinary wealth and technological advancement, yet billions of people still face insecurity, poverty, and vulnerability throughout their lives. Illness, unemployment, disability, old age, climate-related disasters, and economic crises continue to push millions into deprivation.

The central question before us is therefore not whether social protection is necessary. The evidence is overwhelming. The real question is whether universal social protection can become truly sustainable and equitable without a legally binding normative framework that guarantees it as a right rather than leaving it dependent on temporary priorities or emergency responses.

Social protection, although organized differently across countries, responds to fundamental—even existential—human concerns: survival, dignity, and the right to live free from fear and want. In practice, it may include public and private schemes, contributory and non-contributory systems, universal and targeted measures. But regardless of institutional design, its purpose is the same: to protect people against life-course risks and to ensure access to essential services and income security.

By reducing poverty and inequality, social protection improves health outcomes and supports educational attainment. But it also promotes social mobility and strengthens social cohesion. It is therefore indispensable for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly those related to poverty eradication, health, gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequalities. **The 2030 Agenda reflects this clearly.**

For social development practitioners and social workers, these are not abstract principles. They are part of daily professional engagement with individuals and communities facing insecurity and exclusion.

Over the last two decades, universal social protection has gained remarkable international support. Organizations such as the International Labour Organization, the World Bank, UNICEF, WHO, and UNESCO have all recognized its importance, even if their definitions and operational approaches differ in nuance and emphasis.

Among the most influential normative developments has been the ILO Recommendation No. 202 on Social Protection Floors (2012). This recommendation reflects a rights-based approach and promotes nationally defined guarantees that ensure at least basic income security and access to essential healthcare for all.

Recommendation 202 represented a major intellectual and political breakthrough. It strengthened the understanding that social protection is not merely a residual safety net for the poorest. Rather, it is a foundational pillar of human development, economic resilience, and social cohesion.

At the same time, Recommendation 202 remains exactly that—a recommendation. It is not a legally binding convention. States are encouraged, but not legally obliged, to implement it.

This raises an important issue. If universal social protection is indeed fundamental to human dignity and social justice, should it remain dependent primarily on political goodwill? Or should societies move toward stronger legal codification that recognizes social protection as an enforceable social right?

My argument is that legal codification can play a transformative role.

Codifying the right to social protection does not necessarily mean imposing a rigid, one-size-fits-all global model. Countries differ greatly in their histories, institutional capacities, demographic structures, and fiscal realities. Effective legal frameworks must therefore allow for flexibility, progressive realization, and contextual adaptation. However, legal codification does achieve several critical objectives.

First, it transforms social protection from charity into entitlement.

When benefits depend solely on changing political preferences, they remain vulnerable to economic downturns, electoral cycles, or ideological shifts. Legal recognition provides continuity, predictability, and accountability. It allows citizens to claim rights rather than plead for assistance.

Second, legal frameworks promote institutional stability.

Fragmented and crisis-driven schemes often emerge in response to emergencies, but they frequently lack sustainability and long-term vision. A legal foundation can integrate policies into coherent national systems, promoting coordination and clarifying responsibilities among institutions.

Third, codification strengthens democratic legitimacy.

Constitutional provisions, framework laws, and justiciable social rights enable courts, parliaments, civil society organizations, and citizens themselves to participate in oversight and implementation. In this sense, law becomes an instrument of social accountability.

Importantly, the idea of legally grounded social protection is not new. International human rights instruments already recognize related principles. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights both affirm the right to social security and an adequate standard of living.

The challenge, however, lies in translating these broad principles into operational and enforceable national commitments.

Some countries have already moved in this direction. Constitutional guarantees of social rights exist in many regions. **Framework laws on social protection** have emerged in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. Sector-specific legislation on pensions, healthcare, disability benefits, and child protection has expanded considerably.

Yet globally, implementation remains uneven, and many systems continue to be fragmented, underfunded, or exclusionary.

One of the principal objections raised against stronger legal commitments is the argument that universal social protection is simply too costly.

This argument deserves careful examination because it is often presented as self-evident. In reality, it rests on a narrow understanding of cost and ignores both empirical evidence and historical experience.

First, the real cost frequently lies in inaction. **The opportunity cost of doing nothing—or pursuing only limited, partial solutions—is very high.**

Societies that leave large segments of the population unprotected often face far greater long-term costs: deepening poverty, worsening public health crises, increased inequality, social instability, migration pressures, and political polarization.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated this with extraordinary clarity. Countries lacking robust social protection systems were forced into expensive emergency interventions, while millions suffered avoidable hardship. Prevention is almost always less costly than emergency repair.

Second, social protection should be understood as **an investment rather than merely an expenditure.**

Well-designed systems support labor force participation, sustain household consumption during downturns, protect human capital, and stabilize economies during crises. Healthier and more secure populations are more productive and more capable of contributing economically and socially.

Third, evidence consistently shows that fiscal space for universal social protection exists.

Studies by the ILO, IMF, and World Bank demonstrate that countries can expand social protection through improved tax administration, progressive taxation, combating illicit financial flows, and reallocating inefficient subsidies. In many cases, the issue is less one of affordability than of political priorities and policy choices. **Where there is a will, there is a way.**

Fourth, universality itself can generate efficiencies.

Highly targeted schemes often require complex administrative systems, intrusive eligibility verification, and costly monitoring mechanisms. They can also produce exclusion errors and social stigma. Universal approaches simplify administration, broaden risk-sharing, and strengthen public support for social programs.

Fifth, we should not underestimate the importance of international solidarity.

A future international convention on universal social protection would not imply that poorer countries must shoulder the entire burden alone. International cooperation, technical assistance, concessional financing, and South–South cooperation can all contribute to gradual and realistic implementation consistent with the principle of leaving no one behind.

And finally, experience demonstrates that progress is possible.

Countries with very different **levels of economic development**—including South Africa, Costa Rica, Mongolia, and Georgia—have introduced universal pensions, healthcare systems, or child benefits despite limited resources. Their experiences show that phased implementation combined with political commitment can achieve meaningful results.

The broader issue before us is ultimately philosophical as well as institutional.

What kind of society do we wish to build? That is why **universal social protection is ultimately a question with existential overtones.**

Do we continue to treat social protection primarily as a temporary corrective mechanism activated during crises? Or do we recognize it as a permanent and universal foundation for human dignity, social citizenship, and sustainable development?

Legally binding frameworks alone will not solve all problems. Laws without political commitment, institutional capacity, and adequate financing remain ineffective. But without legal guarantees, social protection systems often remain fragmented, vulnerable to reversal, and fragile in the long run.

Legal codification can therefore serve as an essential bridge between aspiration and implementation.

It can help societies move from reactive welfare responses toward preventive, inclusive, and well-being-oriented development strategies. It can help transform "**freedom from**" insecurity into "**freedom to**" participate, contribute, and plan for the future.

Universal social protection should not be viewed as an unaffordable luxury. It is a strategic investment in human capital, economic resilience, democratic stability, and—**last but not least**—social cohesion.

In the end, the real fiscal irresponsibility lies not in protecting people, but in failing to do so—and then paying the far higher social and economic costs that inevitably follow.



What Harm Reduction Can Teach Us About Social Welfare

by Loyal Bou Harfouch

Should people only receive help after they've solved their problems? Most people would say no. People routinely take practical precautions without expecting risk to disappear entirely. Risk is unavoidable, but individuals can take proportionate steps to reduce its consequences, a principle known as harm reduction.

The term is most often associated with drug policy, but the idea itself is much broader. Harm reduction means taking practical and proportionate steps to limit the negative consequences of a risky behavior or situation, even when the underlying risk cannot be eliminated entirely. It favors approaches that preserve individual choice, address identifiable harms, and avoid imposing unnecessary costs or restrictions on others.

Drug policy has become the clearest example of harm reduction in action because the consequences are often immediate. An opioid overdose can become fatal within minutes. Sharing injection equipment can spread HIV or hepatitis C long before someone is ready or able to stop using drugs. In situations like these, waiting until someone achieves recovery before offering support may leave no opportunity for recovery at all. Like many chronic health conditions, substance use disorders often involve progress, setbacks, and relapse. Helping people stay alive and connected to healthcare during those periods increases the likelihood that treatment remains available when they are ready.

That is why harm reduction includes interventions such as naloxone, an overdose reversal medication; sterile syringe programs that exchange used injection equipment for sterile supplies; and medications for opioid use disorder that reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms. These approaches are designed to reduce immediate risks while maintaining a connection to healthcare and other support services. Decades of research have shown that they reduce overdose deaths, lower the transmission of infectious diseases, and increase engagement with treatment.¹

Despite this evidence, harm reduction continues to generate debate. Critics often argue that making drug use safer encourages drug use itself. The research does not support that conclusion. Instead, studies consistently show that harm reduction programs reduce health risks without increasing drug use and frequently serve as an entry point to treatment for people who might otherwise remain disconnected from care.

The larger misunderstanding, however, is that harm reduction begins and ends with addiction. In reality, harm reduction is part of everyday life, even if it is rarely described that way.

Harm reduction already guides many voluntary decisions. Property owners keep fire extinguishers because a small accident can otherwise threaten lives and neighboring property. Banks and customers use two-factor authentication to limit fraud. Businesses maintain backups so that one technical failure does not destroy years of work. These choices acknowledge risk without assuming that every risk requires prohibition, punishment, or a sweeping public response.

Once viewed this way, it becomes clear that harm reduction is not confined to addiction. It is a practical approach to decision-making that can inform many areas of social policy.

Consider homelessness. Some housing programs have traditionally required participants to address mental illness or substance use before qualifying for permanent housing. Housing First, a homeless

¹ <https://reason.org/policy-brief/harm-reduction-an-evidence-based-approach-to-the-drug-war/>

assistance approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing without requiring people to first address behavioral health conditions or complete treatment programs, tested a different sequence by addressing chronic housing instability earlier while pairing housing with case management and other services.² The policy question is practical: Does changing the order of existing interventions improve measurable outcomes and reduce reliance on costly emergency systems? A systematic review of randomized controlled trials found that Housing First participants were more than twice as likely to achieve stable housing, with 24 percent fewer hospitalizations and 37 percent fewer emergency department visits, and no increase in problematic substance use.³ The findings illustrate a broader harm reduction principle: a targeted intervention may be justified when it reduces identifiable harms and lowers demands on more expensive public systems.

Violence prevention provides another illustration of harm reduction in practice. Violence is rarely the responsibility of a single institution, so effective responses increasingly involve coordination across schools, healthcare providers, families, community organizations, and the justice system. A recent Lancet Child & Adolescent Health umbrella review synthesized evidence from 216 systematic reviews identified through 22,117 screened studies, making it one of the most comprehensive evaluations of violence prevention to date.⁴ The review concluded that every major INSPIRE strategy now includes interventions with sufficient evidence to support implementation, with the strongest evidence found for parenting programs, whole-school approaches, and cognitive behavioral therapy for children exposed to violence. Together, these findings demonstrate that reducing harm often depends on coordinated action across multiple sectors rather than any single intervention.

Neither of these examples is typically described as harm reduction. Yet both reflect the same practical way of thinking. They acknowledge that risk is part of everyday life and that better policy focuses on limiting unnecessary harm while improving the likelihood of better outcomes.

That perspective becomes especially valuable in social welfare because people's lives rarely fit neatly within the boundaries of a single agency or program.

Where governments already operate programs involving healthcare, housing, education, child welfare, or justice, those programs are usually divided among specialized agencies.

Specialization can improve expertise, but it can also obscure duplication, conflicting rules, and unintended costs.

This is where harm reduction offers a useful lens for policymakers. Instead of evaluating each program in isolation, it encourages policymakers and implementation scientists to ask broader questions. Where do existing policies create unnecessary barriers, duplicate services, or shift costs onto other institutions? Which rules interfere with voluntary, community-based, or private responses? Are agencies addressing clearly defined harms, or expanding their reach without evidence that the added intervention will improve outcomes?

Every policy involves tradeoffs. A measure intended to improve one outcome can create new costs or barriers elsewhere. Enforcement aimed at visible disorder, for example, may displace activity without resolving the underlying problem and can increase demands on courts, emergency departments, or local budgets. Likewise, regulations that make it harder for community organizations or charities to address local needs can unintentionally increase reliance on more costly public systems. Identifying these effects early allows policymakers to compare options, limit unintended consequences, and make more disciplined use of scarce public resources.

Viewed through this lens, harm reduction encourages policymakers to evaluate policies by their real-world outcomes rather than their intentions, remain open to adapting when evidence changes, and recognize that improving one part of a system often depends on strengthening the connections between many others.

² <https://endhomelessness.org/resources/toolkits-and-training-materials/housing-first/>

³ <https://jech.bmj.com/content/73/5/379>

⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352464225002147>

This perspective is equally relevant to housing, child welfare, education, transportation, public safety, and countless other areas of social policy. The specific solutions will differ across countries and communities, but the underlying questions remain remarkably consistent. Are resources being directed where they are most likely to make a measurable difference? Are different systems reinforcing one another, or working at cross-purposes? Are policies being evaluated based on evidence and outcomes, or simply because they reflect what policymakers believe should work?

The article began with a simple question: Should people only receive help after they've solved their problems? Most people would still answer no.

The most valuable lesson harm reduction offers may be a modest one: individuals remain responsible for the direction of their own lives, but public policy can either preserve or restrict their ability to make safer choices. The strongest policies reduce identifiable harms, avoid unnecessary coercion, make disciplined use of public resources, and leave individuals with greater freedom to improve their own circumstances.

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Where Rights Happen: Territories, Encounters and Collective Constructions – A Discourse¹

by Sandra Carla Sarde Mirabelli

The concern for the collective good of our country, our city or neighborhood, based on loving values, makes us all seek to nurture and protect this good. (Bell Hooks, 2021, p.13)²

Contemporary society still lives with deep inequalities and although human rights are recognized as universal, their realization does not occur equally for all people. The social, cultural, economic and political conditions, as well as the historical trajectories and power relations present in each context, directly influence the possibilities of access to and exercise of these rights.

Reflecting on the promotion of human dignity implies, therefore, questioning historically naturalized practices and behaviors that can reproduce processes of exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization. It also means recognizing that the needs of the subjects are not homogeneous and that responses to situations of inequality need to consider the characteristics and concrete experiences of the people and territories where they live.

Understanding this diversity is key to transforming human rights from general principles into concrete actions. In this sense, its promotion is directly related to the cultural, educational and social practices developed in everyday life. Human rights are not an isolated field, but cross different dimensions of life, such as access to education, culture, adequate food, health, leisure, well-being, community life and social participation. These elements are fundamental for the construction of dignified living conditions and for the strengthening of citizenship.

Education, in this perspective, goes beyond the transmission of knowledge and can constitute a space for dialogue, listening, reflection and collective construction of knowledge. Likewise,

culture represents an important dimension of identity and belonging, enabling different groups to express their histories, memories, values, and ways of understanding the world. These dimensions mean recognizing diversity as a constitutive element of society and strengthening the bonds between people and the places where they live.

It is in this context that the territory assumes a central role. The promotion and defense of human rights take place in the relationships and experiences developed in the spaces where people build their stories, establish bonds, share meanings and elaborate forms of existence. The territory, therefore, must be understood beyond a geographical delimitation. It is also constituted by social, cultural, economic, political and symbolic aspects that relate to and give meaning to collective life.

The territory is, therefore, a lived space. It contains memories, trajectories, affections, conflicts, inequalities, forms of organization and strategies of resistance. Also present are resources, public equipment, institutions, collectives, community organizations, cultural spaces, schools, health services, social assistance equipment and different initiatives built by the population itself. Knowing a territory implies recognizing this complexity and understanding that its characteristics cannot be reduced only to its socioeconomic indicators or its material conditions.

Looking at the territory means observing both situations of vulnerability and violation of rights and the existing capacities to face them. Many communities develop their own strategies of care, solidarity, organization and resistance in the face of adverse situations. Neighborhood networks, associations, cultural groups, social movements, institutions and community initiatives can play a

¹This discourse is based on the experience of Social Work, participation in rights councils and monitoring the Human Rights movement, through seminars, congresses, conferences, meetings and lives.

²Hooks, Bell. All about love: new perspectives. São Paulo: Editora Elefante, 2021.

fundamental role in building responses to local demands. Recognizing these experiences means valuing subjects and knowledge that often remain invisible.

Adopting this view also means recognizing that both access to rights and situations of violation are crossed by inequalities related to race, gender, social class, age, origin and cultural identities, among other aspects. These dimensions can combine and produce different forms of exclusion and access to opportunities. Therefore, actions aimed at promoting human rights need to consider the particularities of subjects and locations, avoiding standardized responses to different realities.

In this process, the articulation between different actors and organizations present in the territories becomes fundamental. No institution or service, in isolation, can respond to the complexity of social demands. The construction of collaborative networks allows for the sharing of experiences, knowledge and responsibilities, expanding the circulation of information and developing more integrated strategies.

Experiences carried out in partnership and dialogue with collectives, social movements, community representatives and the social assistance network confirm the importance of cooperation for the defense and promotion of human rights. Working in a network does not only mean bringing together institutions, but building relationships of trust, establishing common goals and recognizing that different knowledge and forms of action can contribute to social transformation.

In this sense, listening occupies a fundamental place. Listening means recognizing the legitimacy of the experiences of those who experience certain situations on a daily basis. People who live in the territories have knowledge built from their trajectories and relationships and can contribute both to identifying problems that do not always appear in institutional diagnoses and to pointing out possibilities for coping.

The creation of spaces for collective learning, listening, exchange of experiences and the shared elaboration of knowledge favors the joint identification of problems, challenges, resources and possibilities existing in each territory. These spaces are built by the relationships, memories, experiences and narratives of the people who participate in them. By bringing together different perspectives and promoting the circulation of knowledge, local articulations are strengthened and the possibilities of building practices related to social justice, care and the expansion of access to rights are expanded.

Participation, in this context, needs to be understood as an effective process. It's not just about inviting people to activities or consulting with the community about pre-defined decisions. Participating means creating conditions so that the subjects can contribute to the definition of priorities, to the construction of actions and to the evaluation of results. In this way, participatory spaces strengthen autonomy, belonging, and the ability to intervene in reality.

Cultural and educational practices also play an important role in this process. Workshops, conversation circles, artistic activities, community actions and training meetings can create opportunities for people to express their experiences, recognize their identities and build new meanings about the place where they live. When developed in a participatory manner, these actions can go beyond the punctual character and contribute to the strengthening of community bonds.

The appreciation of memories also contributes to the understanding of territories. The stories of people, families and communities help to reveal the processes that constituted a given space and the events that marked their trajectories. Preserving and sharing these memories strengthens identities, combats processes of invisibility, and recognizes the contribution of different groups to the formation of society.

At the same time, territories are dynamic spaces, constantly transformed by social, economic, cultural, and political changes. New subjects arrive, others move, institutions are modified and new forms of organization emerge. For this reason, knowing the territory does not mean producing a definitive reading, but maintaining a permanent attitude of observation, listening and dialogue.

Promoting human rights also requires creating environments in which differences can be recognized and respected. Democratic coexistence presupposes spaces in which different opinions, identities, trajectories and forms of expression can coexist. In this sense, it is necessary to confront discriminatory practices and barriers that distance certain groups from spaces of participation and decision-making.

The valorization of the knowledge produced in the territories themselves and the creation of environments favorable to participation and the exercise of citizenship become, therefore, essential elements in the educational processes and in the experiences built collectively. These processes can stimulate dialogue, bring people together, strengthen bonds, and contribute to the construction of perspectives guided by greater equity and social justice.

More than developing actions **in** a given territory, it is about building actions **with** the territory. This difference is fundamental. When an initiative is externally planned and applied in a standardized way, there is a risk of disregarding local needs, experiences, and knowledge. When the community participates in the construction of the process, the possibilities of belonging, appropriation and continuity of actions are expanded.

Building with the territory means recognizing that communities have a voice, history, and the capacity to produce responses. It also means understanding that professionals and institutions have important knowledge and resources, but that these elements need to dialogue with the knowledge and experiences of those who live the daily reality.

Thinking about rights from the territories is, finally, recognizing that citizenship happens in concrete places and in the relationships established between people. It is present in the school, in the square, in public services, in cultural spaces, in community associations and in the networks that are formed in everyday life. It is in these spaces that people build strategies to face inequalities and develop practices of solidarity and transformation.

In this way, promoting human rights means creating conditions for each territory to strengthen its capacities, expand its networks and recognize the subjects who are part of it as protagonists of its own history. It means investing in listening, participation, culture, education, care and articulation between different actors.

Rights, therefore, do not happen only in documents, laws or institutions. They happen when they find space in everyday life, when they are transformed into concrete practices, relationships and opportunities. They happen when a person is heard, when an identity is respected, when a community participates in a decision, when knowledge is recognized, and when different subjects come together to transform a reality.

It is in this movement that territories cease to be just spaces where policies and actions are carried out and come to be understood as places of production of rights. They are spaces of memory, belonging, creation, learning and transformation. Recognizing them in their complexity means expanding the capacity to build more democratic, inclusive and connected responses to the real needs of the population.

Thus, the promotion of human rights is strengthened when it is based on the principle that every person has dignity, voice, history and the ability to contribute to the construction of society. By valuing territories, encounters and collective constructions, not only access to rights is expanded, but also the possibility of building more solidary, participatory and equitable social relations. The challenge is to transform this understanding into permanent practices, capable of articulating different knowledge, recognizing different experiences and creating, in each territory, conditions for rights to be effectively lived.

In this way, educating, caring, participating, dialoguing and articulating are no longer isolated actions and start to compose the same perspective of transformation. A perspective that recognizes that the defense of human rights is built in everyday life, in relationships and in territories, through the active participation of subjects and communities. After all, it is when rights find people, bonds, spaces for participation and concrete possibilities of realization that they cease to be just principles and become part of the lived experience.

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Educational Practice with Older Adults: Intergenerational Friendship and Digital Inclusion

by Conceição de Maria Goulart Braga Cuba

INTRODUCTION

We present a dialogue regarding intergenerational friendship and the challenges faced by the elderly population—particularly concerning ageism and their integration into the digital world—within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic exacerbated poverty and inequality, revealed pronounced ageism directed at older adults, and brought to light various issues that constitute a form of learning related to the aging process.

The aging of the Brazilian population has spurred research and initiatives involving public policies and programs at both public and private universities in the country, as well as in other settings such as the Social Service of Commerce (SESC). SESC pioneered work with the elderly in Brazil and inspired several university-based programs for older adults.

We present an educational practice involving older adults—defined in Brazil as individuals over the age of 60 under the Statute of the Older Adult (Law 14.423 of 2022). This practice was developed as part of the extension project "Friendship of Older Adults in the Family and Society," which I created in 2009 at the Open University for Older Adults (UnATI/UERJ) and which evolved into the Human Development Center (NucEH- UERJ) in 2023. The project also operates within the educational scope of a Community Center where NucEH conducts activities; education is one of the three pillars guiding the Center, alongside research and extension.

The "Friendship of Older Adults in the Family and Society" project draws its theoretical framework from the work of German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975). Its objective is to "foster greater integration of older adults from UnATI/UERJ into their families and society, particularly by ensuring their social rights and citizenship" (CUBA, 2008, p. 3).

In demographic terms, Brazil in 2022 recorded a total of 22,169,101 people aged 65 and older, representing 10.9% of the Brazilian population. Life expectancy stands at 76.4 years (IBGE, 2023)—79.7 years for women and 73.1 years for men.

This progressive increase in the elderly population reveals an aging process characterized by heterogeneity regarding health status, cultural lifestyles, and individual choices about how to navigate life and age, among other factors.

It also highlights disparities in class, race, ethnicity, and religion, alongside a rise in the number of impoverished older adults and those experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, there is increased dependency—necessitating care—and a significant percentage of older adults remain excluded from the digital world.

Increased longevity fosters greater intergenerational interaction within families and society; many older adults are engaging with and updating their knowledge—including in the digital realm—alongside their children and grandchildren. Digital interaction is crucial for enabling older adults to participate in online activities tailored to their age group, a trend that became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of interaction strengthens emotional bonds and intergenerational solidarity, as children and grandchildren assist their parents and grandparents in accessing technology, helping them remain active, up-to-date, and productive. Consequently, this contributes to a more dignified and less unequal quality of life. To ground this reflection, we present a brief conceptual discussion regarding intergenerational friendship and social rights—and their relationship to the political element of friendship in Hannah Arendt's thought—as well as educational practice with older adults in the context of digital inclusion; finally, we offer some concluding remarks.

Intergenerational friendship, digital inclusion, and the social rights of the elderly

Friendship in old age is grounded in trust, affection, sincerity, and loyalty, and is strengthened through shared interaction and mutual respect. Despite its significance as a means of exchanging experiences and preventing isolation, it also encompasses relationships marked by inequality and tension. Friendship highlights the importance of networks of friends who mobilize to provide various forms of mutual aid and support within public spaces.

The friendships among the elderly participants in the project are viewed as a social support network and—from a political perspective (CUBA, 2015), as identified in our Master's research—encompass care and various forms of support. Regarding the political dimension of friendship, Hannah Arendt¹—whose work underpins both our research and the project itself—expresses the following:

“The political element of friendship is that, in authentic dialogue, each friend can understand the truth inherent in the other's opinion [...], how and in what specific articulation the common world appears to the other, who, as a person, will always be unequal or different. This type of understanding [...] is a political perception par excellence” (ARENDT, 2008, pp. 59-60).

The political dimension of intergenerational friendship involves the exchange of experiences across age groups, the public expression of views on social issues, and organizing with friends to devise solutions and advocate for rights. This combination of factors fosters a sense of belonging to a collective among the elderly and constitutes an act of politics and citizenship—or the realization of the Arendtian “right to have rights.”

Friendship among the elderly in research

The importance of friendship in old age has been highlighted in both international and national studies. International research shows that, alongside family, friendship—acting as a support network—plays a significant role in happiness, reduced health problems, greater well-being, lower stress levels, and increased longevity, particularly among the oldest-old (HARVARD HEALTH PUBLISHING, 2011).

The realm of intergenerational relationships also extends to neighbors and intergenerational programs. Let us consider what Sequeira (2014) says about this aspect:

Intergenerational relationships entail interaction and connection between various generations; these may be relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, family ties involving more than one generation (such as grandmother, mother, and daughter), or work and friendship bonds between individuals of different ages [...] (SEQUEIRA, 2014, p. 14).

Regarding intergenerational interaction, the Statute of the Elderly Person (2022)—specifically Item IV, Sole Paragraph—clarifies that a priority is

the “facilitation of alternative forms of participation, engagement, and social interaction between the elderly and other generations.”

Research identifying “Blue Zones”—regions of the world with healthy, long-lived populations and high numbers of centenarians, such as Nuoro (Sardinia, Italy), Okinawa (Japan), Loma Linda (USA), Ikaria (Greece), and the Nicoya Peninsula (Costa Rica)—demonstrates that interacting with diverse types of people (intergenerational friendship) is a vital component of longevity. Along with other factors, these varied social connections are a defining characteristic of the exceptional longevity found in these populations (BUETTNER D; SKEMP S., 2023). In Brazil, the results of a study conducted by the Federal University of Minas Gerais, the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, and the World Health Organization (ELSI-Brazil/2018) reveal that friendships, social interaction, and family contact not only prevent isolation but also ward off depression among the elderly (MARCELINO, K. G. S. B. et al., 2024). Cristina Hofmann, Coordinator of Elderly Health, explains that social relationships also foster the “promotion and/or maintenance of the physical and mental health of older adults” (SANTA CASA DE MARINGÁ, 2023).

Educational practice and digital inclusion for the elderly

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in Rio de Janeiro on March 15, 2020, two questions prompted us to consider how to continue our work with the elderly:

1 – How could we keep the elderly active and up-to-date, interacting with friends and family in the digital world, while also strengthening their social rights?

2 – How could we encourage the elderly to engage in digital interaction via WhatsApp?

It was clear that addressing these issues required—urgently and significantly—strengthening intergenerational family ties, dispelling ageist prejudices, and fostering digital literacy and inclusion. The goal was to empower the elderly to use smartphones, computers, and applications such as WhatsApp, video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Google Meet), and streaming services (primarily YouTube and Netflix). We recognized this as a crucial, emergency-response alternative for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the United Nations (UN) recommended increasing “[...] social support [...] using digital technology [...] (as it is) [...] vital for coping with immense suffering and isolation [...]” (UNITED NATIONS BRAZIL, 2020, n.p.).

¹Hannah Arendt did not write articles or books on friendship, yet she offers commentary on this form of relationship within her work. Friendship is not a focus of study or practice for social workers.

This is because new technologies “strengthen intergenerational relationships and communication, fostering social inclusion for the elderly and grandparents by bridging spatial, cultural, and generational divides” (RAMOS; RABINOVICH; AZAMBUJA, 2020, p. 2). Faced with the need for social isolation and banking on the elderly's acceptance of online social work, we transitioned from in-person activities (conducted from 2009 to 2019) to digital engagement (starting in 2020).

From Analog to Digital

We began our social work with the elderly in a digital format—a challenging shift that required digital literacy and inclusion. Nevertheless, we created a WhatsApp group that included the seniors as well as their children and grandchildren. Through this app, we exchanged text and audio messages, held meetings, and discussed various topics based on an activity schedule similar to the one used in in-person classes.

We also shared YouTube videos featuring songs with lyrics related to the topic at hand; these were read and then sung together. The participation of the seniors' children and grandchildren in the group was crucial, as they helped their parents and grandparents use smartphones and computers to access the content we shared. In some instances, daughters read questions aloud to their parents, helping them formulate answers and comments, and posted their parents' opinions on the class topics in the WhatsApp group. They also taught their parents how to answer video calls for meetings, thereby facilitating the seniors' participation in the online educational activities. For seniors who used their smartphones solely for conversation, we would call them directly to communicate the class topics and other activities, and to ask questions so they could share their views.

In 2021, UnATI-UERJ conducted training on accessing platforms such as Zoom, UERJ, and Google Meet, which we used for classes, meetings, virtual visits, and other online activities. This enabled us to maintain interaction with the seniors by providing information that updated their knowledge regarding the social rights established in the Statute of the Elderly, as well as how to access these rights virtually during the period of social isolation².

The seniors would send activity materials and their own comments via their daughters' WhatsApp accounts—allowing the daughters to see the work—and share their daughters' positive feedback regarding the content they had submitted. Another significant aspect to highlight is the way children and grandchildren welcomed older adults into their homes— even if only temporarily—sharing daily life and continuing to visit them after returning to their own residences.

This increased closeness fostered stronger intergenerational family bonds, playing a crucial role in helping older adults cope with social isolation. Nevertheless:

[...] the pandemic didn't just isolate older adults. It was an opportunity for us to reinvent our lives through activities we could do at home. We had to look after our physical and mental health and engage with technology to bridge the distance... (OLDER ADULT STUDENT).

This account illustrates the need to devise strategies for better coexistence during periods of social distancing; hence our efforts to facilitate constant interaction—through online educational activities—among older adults, their children and grandchildren, and the project team. This underscores the importance of digital literacy and social inclusion across all age groups—particularly for older adults—to strengthen family and community ties, a right affirmed by the Statute of the Older Adult (2022).

Despite the ease of participating in the online educational activity, some challenges arose—such as difficulties using WhatsApp due to a lack of familiarity with the app's features and new technologies (e.g., recording audio messages or adjusting font size, making reading and typing difficult). Participants were often assisted by their daughters and granddaughters, though these family members were not always available. Other issues included discouragement regarding the current situation, a lack of concentration when answering the questions sent to them, and problems with their smartphones or internet access. Furthermore, spending extended periods in front of computer or smartphone screens was tiring.

Despite these difficulties, the older adults developed a sense of identity and belonging—albeit through an online educational activity—and became increasingly familiar with the digital world. This played a crucial role in helping them cope with the void created by social distancing.

²The educational practice of our project is guided by Social Work debates regarding remote activities, recognizing that these can be carried out by social workers during the pandemic, provided that the professional attributes and competencies established in Brazil—specifically in Law No. 8.662/1993, which regulates the profession—are respected.

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion enables people to access technology while helping the community use it more consciously and promoting autonomy, security, and quality of life for older adults—particularly older Brazilians who did not grow up with these new technologies. Internet usage among older adults in Brazil has been rising rapidly. In 2024, 74.5% of people aged 60 and older used the internet, according to the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD-IBGE, 2024).

Although digital inclusion is vital for older adults—given that technology is now used in almost all daily activities—many are unable to access the internet or use smartphone applications such as WhatsApp, email, and social media. They face various challenges, including a high prevalence of discrimination, stereotypes, and ageism directed at them by society at large. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), these issues can manifest in institutional settings, interpersonal relationships, or even as internalized (self-directed) attitudes.

This constitutes a violation of rights guaranteed by the Statute of the Older Person (2022), which protects older adults against violence and exploitation—including in the digital realm—as highlighted in the report from the National Independent Conference titled "For the Older Person's Right to Digital Education to Expand Access to Comprehensive Care" (FIOCRUZ-Brasília, 2025).

Furthermore, as we have observed, the majority of older adults lack full access to the digital world, revealing "[...] a two-tiered digital citizenship among the elderly population, where a minority enjoys full, high-quality access—enabling them to reap the benefits of technology—while a vast majority is relegated to precarious participation with limited autonomy, or simply excluded" (TAVARES, 2026, n.p.).

Considerations

The digital inclusion of older adults through online educational practices represents a viable alternative for staying active during periods of social distancing. This form of digital interaction updates and expands knowledge, fosters exchanges between older adults and other generations, enables greater interaction with family and friends across various age groups, and equips older adults to access social media and websites to seek out diverse information. Furthermore, it prevents social isolation, raises awareness about online scams and how to avoid them, empowers individuals to assert their rights in the virtual world, and allows them to exercise the "right to have rights"—or Arendtian citizenship.

However, we observe that a segment of the older population struggles to learn how to use new technologies, often due to an internalized belief in their own inability to learn (TAVARES, 2026; n.p.)—a mindset that may stem from societal prejudice directed at them. This form of resistance—both from the individuals themselves and society at large—can hinder the acceptance of virtual systems adapted to real-life contexts, as these systems integrate digital technologies into daily life.

However, the imposition of new technologies does not mean a society must address its needs solely through digital channels. After all, not only do a significant number of Brazilians—including the elderly—lack the financial means to purchase smartphones, computers, and other devices, but the country also faces common issues regarding internet access and other factors. Added to this are various limitations that hinder the acquisition of digital literacy skills.

Although various programs for the elderly in Brazil offer activities aimed at teaching the use of new technologies, expanding access to information, and reducing vulnerability to fraud, the rapid advancement of new technologies highlights an urgent need to implement programs that foster full and critical digital inclusion for Brazil's elderly population.

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Publications in Focus

2026 Global Justice Report: A Plan for Equality and Prosperity Within Planetary Boundaries

by Sergei Zeleney

The 2026 *Global Justice Report: A Plan for Equality and Prosperity Within Planetary Boundaries*, published in June 2026, makes an ambitious and timely contribution to the debate on the future of global development.¹ Written by a distinguished team of economists and researchers, including Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty, with substantial expertise in inequality, economic development, taxation, climate change, and global economic governance, the report brings together a remarkable breadth of knowledge and evidence.²

The report combines intellectual authority with an unusually ambitious attempt to translate principles of social justice and planetary sustainability into a coherent, quantified global scenario. In this respect, its systemic approach echoes, although from a very different intellectual and methodological perspective, the influential *Limits to Growth* reports of the Club of Rome, particularly the pioneering work associated with systems scientist Donella Meadows and her colleagues several decades ago. The central proposition of the *Global Justice Report* is both straightforward and far-reaching: planetary habitability and high levels of well-being for all are not mutually exclusive, but achieving both requires a fundamental transformation of the global economic, social, and political order. It outlines a roadmap for bridging global income gaps while limiting global warming to 1.8°C by 2100.

Rather than treating climate change, inequality, poverty, consumption, and international finance as separate problems, the report demonstrates how deeply interconnected they are and why they must therefore be addressed together. This integrated perspective is one of its most important strengths. The authors do not simply call for greater equality or faster decarbonization; they explore how redistribution, ecological transition, changes in consumption and working patterns, and reform of international financial institutions could reinforce one another.

At the heart of the report are three mutually reinforcing pillars: **rapid decarbonization, sufficiency, and a drastic reduction in inequality in income, wealth, and power**. This integrated approach is perhaps its most important contribution. Climate policy is too often discussed primarily in terms of technological change and the substitution of fossil fuels with renewable energy. The report argues that this is insufficient. Decarbonization must be accompanied by changes in patterns of consumption, working time, food production, land use, and resource use. At the same time, these changes cannot be politically or socially sustainable in a deeply unequal world. Inequality is therefore not simply a matter of distributive justice; it is also a structural obstacle to ecological transformation.

¹ See: <https://globaljusticeproject.wid.world/global-justice-report/>

² The **Global Justice Project** is a collective research initiative developed by the **World Inequality Lab**. It aims to provide a platform to stimulate research, policymaking, and citizen engagement in shaping a fairer, more democratic, and sustainable 21st century. The project involves a team of 45 contributors. In addition, more than 200 researchers participated in the construction of the **World Inequality Database** used in this research. The project also draws on newly assembled sources, including the **World Sustainable Economy-Environment Database**, the **World Human Capital Expenditure Database**, and the **World Historical Balance of Payment Database**.

The report's concept of **sufficiency** deserves particular attention. It moves the discussion beyond the conventional objective of continuously increasing production and consumption and asks a more fundamental question: what constitutes a good life within planetary boundaries? The proposed reduction in annual labour hours—from approximately 2,100 today to around 1,000 by 2100—is especially significant. It connects ecological sustainability with the long-standing social objective of reducing working time and expanding opportunities for education, care, leisure, and participation. In this sense, sufficiency is not presented as austerity or deprivation. Rather, it is understood as a reorientation of economic activity toward human well-being, with greater emphasis on health, education, care, and other relatively less material-intensive sectors.

The report is particularly compelling in its treatment of inequality. Its proposed convergence of per capita monthly national income toward €5,000 across countries by 2100 would dramatically reduce the current global income gap. Equally striking is its proposed redistribution of wealth: the share of the bottom 50 percent of the world's population would rise from approximately 2 percent to 30 percent, while the share held by the billionaire class would fall from 6 percent to 0.05 percent. These are undoubtedly radical propositions. Yet the report's argument is that redistribution on this scale is not only desirable from the standpoint of justice, but also necessary for financing climate action, strengthening human capital, and building political support for transformation among lower- and middle-income populations.

The quantitative scenario is one of the report's major strengths. It attempts to translate broad principles of global justice into measurable trajectories. By combining material indicators—working hours, education and health expenditure, energy use, greenhouse-gas emissions, land use, and forest cover—with monetary indicators of income, wealth, and taxation, the report establishes a common framework for discussing social and ecological objectives. Its projected outcome is particularly striking: under the proposed sustainable convergence scenario, global warming would reach approximately 1.8°C by 2100, compared with more than 4°C under conditions of persistent inequality and slow decarbonization.

The scale of the proposed institutional transformation is equally ambitious. The report envisages a **Global Justice Fund**, with annual expenditures averaging 10.3 percent of world GDP between 2026 and 2060, alongside a **World Sovereign Fund** whose sustainable asset portfolio would eventually amount to approximately 10 percent of the global capital stock. These proposals are complemented by global wealth and income taxation, including a progressive global wealth tax and very high marginal income taxation at the top. The report also calls for reform of the international monetary and financial system through an International Clearing Union and a new international currency. In doing so, it connects the redistribution of resources with the redistribution of political power.

This latter dimension is particularly important. Global inequality is not merely an economic phenomenon; it is also institutional. The report points to the unequal distribution of voting power in institutions such as the IMF and World Bank and argues for a new international order in which political voice corresponds more closely to population and the principle of equal citizenship. It therefore expands the meaning of social justice beyond income redistribution. Justice must also encompass participation, representation, and the capacity to influence decisions that affect people's lives.

Another strength of the report is its connection with an emerging international agenda for reforming global governance and development finance. Its proposals resonate with initiatives such as the Bridgetown Initiative, the Sevilla Commitment on development finance, the UN process on international tax cooperation, and recent G20 efforts to address global inequality and the concentration of wealth and power. The report's distinctive contribution is to bring many of these ideas into a single, quantified framework extending to 2100. It thereby provides a basis for asking not simply whether particular reforms are desirable, but how different reforms might interact and what their combined consequences could be.

At the same time, the report raises important questions that merit further discussion. Its scenarios necessarily depend on strong assumptions about political feasibility, institutional capacity, and international cooperation. Redistribution of wealth and income on the scale proposed would encounter powerful economic and political interests. Similarly, establishing global taxation mechanisms, a World Sovereign Fund, and substantially reformed international financial institutions would require unprecedented levels of international coordination. The report is at its strongest when it demonstrates that an alternative trajectory is **economically and ecologically conceivable**. The next challenge is to clarify the political pathways through which such a transformation could actually occur.

There is also an important social-policy dimension that could be developed further. The report rightly emphasizes education, health, working time, and gender equality, but the transition it proposes will also depend on strong social protection systems and effective public services. People are more likely to embrace transformations in employment, consumption, and production when they have security against unemployment, illness, disability, old age, and other social risks. Social protection should therefore be understood not merely as a consequence of redistribution, but as one of the institutional foundations of a just ecological transition.

This point also highlights the importance of participation. The report presents its quantitative framework as a basis for democratic debate rather than as a final blueprint. This is a welcome approach. The transformation toward planetary habitability cannot be achieved solely through technocratic planning. Citizens, workers, communities, civil society organizations, and social movements need meaningful opportunities to participate in defining priorities, shaping policies, and evaluating trade-offs. In this respect, the report's emphasis on political voice is as important as its economic calculations.

Overall, the *Global Justice Report* offers a powerful reframing of the relationship between social justice and planetary sustainability. Its most important message is that neither objective can be achieved in isolation. A sustainable future cannot be built on the foundation of extreme inequality, just as social progress cannot be secured by pursuing material growth without regard to ecological limits. Decarbonization, sufficiency, and redistribution must therefore be understood as components of a single transformative agenda.

The report should consequently be read not simply as a forecast or policy blueprint, but as an invitation to rethink the assumptions underlying contemporary development. Its most provocative contribution is the proposition that a world in which the great majority enjoy higher incomes, substantially shorter working hours, better health and education, greater equality, and a stronger political voice can also be a world that remains within planetary boundaries. Whether every quantitative target proves realistic is ultimately less important than the fundamental question the report puts before policymakers and citizens: **what kind of global economy and society do we want to build, and what institutional changes are required to make that future possible?**

In that sense, the *2026 Global Justice Report* is both an analytical exercise and a normative challenge. It moves the debate from managing the contradictions of the existing system toward imagining—and beginning to construct—a different one: a global order in which prosperity is shared, inequality is constrained, democratic participation is strengthened, and human well-being is pursued within the ecological limits of our common planet.

More Activity at ICSW- Save the Date!

TO ICSW Europe Members!

In the European Region this year we have to elect the Regional President, Regional Vice-President, Regional Vice-President, Regional Treasurer and the members of the Regional Board.

Important dates:

- Voting will be in an electronic way in September - October 2026;
- The results of the electronic voting will be announced and approved at the General Assembly in Vienna on **13 November 2026**.

For questions, please, contact the Secretariat of ICSW Europe: gabriela.siantova@icsw.org

Joint Seminar – Marrakesh, October 22–24, 2026

From Exclusion to Belonging: Inclusive Practices to
Strengthen Social and Community Ties

**Organized by the ICSW MENA region, in
collaboration with ICSW Europe and the ICSW Global
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More news coming soon on the ICSW website



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Contributions to the newsletter are welcome!

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