



Welcome Letter

by Antonio López Peláez, ICSW Executive Director

Dear ICSW members, friends, and interested readers,

Welcome to the February 2026 issue of our newsletter.

Social welfare is always local, and it is always global. Awareness of the interconnectedness of our destinies, our models of welfare, and our challenges is one of the reasons why, for almost a hundred years, we have been working together to put basic strategies for strengthening social welfare on the public agenda. At the ICSW, we empower the local and we empower the global. I am proud to publish our Newsletter on the ICSW website, as well as the Newsletters of the regions that make up the ICSW. It is a joint effort, demanded by a challenge that we must all face together: increasing welfare and social justice.

The side event organized by the ICSW and the IASSW at the UN Commission for Social Development on February 4, 2026, entitled “Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Responsive Social Services” was a success thanks to the quality of the experts who participated and the attendance of ICSW members and interested parties. In these uncertain times, rigorous debate and scientific evaluation allow us to put forward accurate diagnoses of the challenges we face collectively. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all those who participated in this event, which has once again placed citizen participation at the center of social policies.

In this issue of our Newsletter, in addition to the President’s Corner, we are publishing some very interesting contributions. First, an article on the Highlights of the ICSW Statement to the Commission for Social Development -64. Secondly, we are honored to publish an article on the Korean model of social welfare, entitled “From Survival to Social Rights: How Korea’s Social Welfare Councils Are Building Community-Centered Welfare” by Kim Sug Pyo, President of the Daegu Council on Social Welfare. We also have the honor of publishing an article on Morocco’s experience in the field of citizen participation, entitled “Citizen Participation and Regional Dynamism: Lessons from Morocco’s Experience of Advanced Regionalization” by Driss Guerraoui, President of the Open University of Dakhla, Morocco.

To complete the information we have been sharing on the international seminars on participation and social welfare organized by the ICSW in 2024 and 2025, which led to the ICSW Ronda Declaration, we are publishing in this issue of the Newsletter the article “Speech at the Ronda Conference in April 2025: Regaining Europe’s Digital Sovereignty Is a Task for Every Democrat” by Philippe Narval, Austria. We also published a brief summary of the Virtual Side Event of the 64th session of the UN Commission for Social Development, 2026, entitled “Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Inclusive and Responsive Social Services,” written by the moderators of the Side Event, Professor Gloria Kirwan (Senior Lecturer at RCSI and ICSW special representative at UN Geneva) and Professor Kristian Brown (Senior Lecturer at RCSI), whom we thank for their commitment to the ICSW. And finally, we publish an article on one of the key issues in social welfare today: mental health, entitled “Giving Voice, Driving Change: Shine’s Work with People and Families Affected by Mental Illness in Ireland” by Nicola Burn, CEO, Ireland.

Finally, the last contribution to this Newsletter is a commentary on a recent book that addresses a key issue in social welfare and social work: AI and the welfare model we are currently building, often without realizing that it reproduces inequalities and coercive power. A brief review written by a professor of Social Work at the Rey Juan Carlos University (URJC), Madrid, Spain.

As in all Newsletters, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the authors of the articles and to all the members of the ICSW for their commitment to the ICSW and to the social welfare of our world.

Take care and stay healthy.

Antonio
ICSW Executive Director

President's Corner



From Global Dialogue to Local Action: Outcomes of the Commission for Social Development Session

by Sergei Zelenev, ICSW President

Every February, the United Nations Commission for Social Development (CSocD) convenes its annual session at UN Headquarters in New York. As a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), CSocD serves as a key intergovernmental forum for addressing the most pressing issues of social development. Its membership brings together government representatives from across the world, including diplomats based in New York, senior officials from capitals, ministers, and other high-level policymakers. Within the UN system, the Commission occupies a unique space where social justice, inclusion, and human well-being are discussed not as secondary concerns, but as central pillars of sustainable development.

For civil society organizations, the Commission offers an important platform to engage directly with global policy debates. As an NGO with consultative status with ECOSOC, the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), alongside many other civil society actors, regularly submits written statements to the Commission's sessions. These statements are not merely formal contributions; they are opportunities to articulate a civil society vision of social development before a global audience of governments, UN agencies, and fellow stakeholders. This year's engagement was no exception. The priority theme of the 64th session—*“Advancing Social Development and Social Justice through Coordinated, Equitable, and Inclusive Policies”*—provided ample scope to advance the core messages of both the ICSW 2025 Manifesto and the Ronda Declaration.

Importantly, ICSW views its participation in the Commission not simply as a perch for lofty statements, but as a genuinely participatory process. One of the less visible yet most meaningful outcomes of CSocD is the opportunity for collective voice-building. ICSW members are consistently invited to contribute to draft statements, enabling them to share national experiences, policy innovations, and lessons learned within the framework of the priority theme. This inclusive method of preparation is itself a practical expression of ICSW's commitment to participation. It allows the organization to move beyond abstract advocacy and ground its messages in lived realities across diverse social, economic, and political contexts.

The written statement submitted to this year's session, which is attached to this newsletter, reflects these collective inputs. It draws heavily on insights generated during the preparation of the Ronda conferences on participation, convened in 2024 and 2025 in Ronda, Spain. These discussions highlighted the central role of participation in strengthening social cohesion, improving service delivery, and restoring trust between institutions and communities. The statement emphasized that social justice cannot be achieved through fragmented or top-down policies, but requires coordinated, equitable, and inclusive approaches that place people at the center of decision-making.

ICSW's engagement with the Commission, however, goes well beyond written submissions. Each year, the organization actively contributes to the session by organizing side events, either in person or online, aligned with the priority theme. These events provide valuable spaces for dialogue, allowing ICSW members and partners to share practical experiences, showcase innovations, and openly discuss challenges. They also serve as bridges between global policy debates and local realities, ensuring that discussions at the UN remain connected to what is happening on the ground.

This year's side event, entitled *“Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Responsive Social Services,”* was built on a simple yet powerful premise: social services work best when they reflect real priorities, lived experiences, and the voices of the people they serve. Co-sponsored by ICSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the event brought together five panelists representing diverse geographical and professional backgrounds. The discussion demonstrated how participatory approaches are reshaping social service delivery in different contexts and how collaboration between governments, professionals, and communities can lead to more responsive and effective outcomes.

The growing emphasis on participatory processes in local governance reflects broader transformations in the 21st century. Cities and communities are increasingly confronted with complex social, economic, and environmental challenges that cannot be addressed through traditional, hierarchical governance models alone. In many parts of the world, citizens are no longer seen merely as passive recipients of public policies, but as active partners in shaping them. Co-design methodologies exemplify this shift. By bringing together public authorities, service providers, civil society organizations, and service users in joint design processes, co-design fosters mutual understanding, shared ownership, and trust.

The discussions during the CSocD session reinforced the value of these approaches. Comparative examples from different regions illustrated how participatory strategies can adapt to varied institutional settings while responding to the specific demands of local actors. They also highlighted persistent challenges, including power imbalances, limited resources, and the need for sustained political commitment. Addressing these challenges requires not only technical solutions, but also a clear normative commitment to participation as a core principle of social development.

When the session concludes, an inevitable question arises: what did we get out of it? Increased visibility and improved networking are certainly among the tangible outcomes. Yet the real value of participation in the Commission lies deeper. CSocD provides ICSW with a space to test ideas, refine messages, and build alliances around a shared vision of social justice. It strengthens the organization's ability to link global frameworks with local practices and reinforces the conviction that inclusive, participatory governance is not an optional add-on, but a prerequisite for effective and equitable social development. In this sense, the outcomes of the Commission extend well beyond the session itself, shaping ongoing work, partnerships, and advocacy in the months and years ahead.

Highlights of the ICSW Statement to Commission for Social Development -64

The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) submitted its written statement to the 64th Session of the Commission for Social Development in support of the priority theme: *“Advancing Social Development and Social Justice through Coordinated, Equitable, and Inclusive Policies.”*

ICSW emphasizes that nearly thirty years after the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the three core pillars—poverty eradication, full employment, and social inclusion—remain highly relevant but insufficiently realized. Persistent global inequalities, demographic changes, environmental crises, conflicts, and rapid technological transformation demand integrated and coherent policy responses that align social, economic, and environmental objectives. Social justice, the statement argues, cannot emerge through fragmented measures but requires coordinated frameworks grounded in human rights and participatory governance.

A central message of the statement is that social development must be participatory. Effective policies depend on meaningful citizen involvement rather than symbolic consultation. Inclusive decision-making strengthens democracy, enhances policy legitimacy, and ensures that solutions reflect lived realities. Transparent governance, accessible information, and accountability mechanisms are essential to build trust between institutions and citizens. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in amplifying community voices and translating them into policy outcomes.

The statement also reflects discussions from the 2025 ICSW conference in Ronda, Spain, which highlighted participation as a key principle for transforming welfare systems. Human rights principles—including dignity, equality, non-discrimination, and accountability—are presented as the foundation for participatory governance. ICSW stresses that participation requires concrete institutional support, adequate financing, and mechanisms such as citizen panels, public hearings, and advisory bodies capable of influencing real decisions.

CSW underlines the importance of civic education and lifelong learning as essential tools for empowering citizens and strengthening democratic culture. While digital technologies and artificial intelligence offer new opportunities for participation, governments must address digital inequalities and protect privacy so that technological innovation promotes inclusion rather than exclusion.

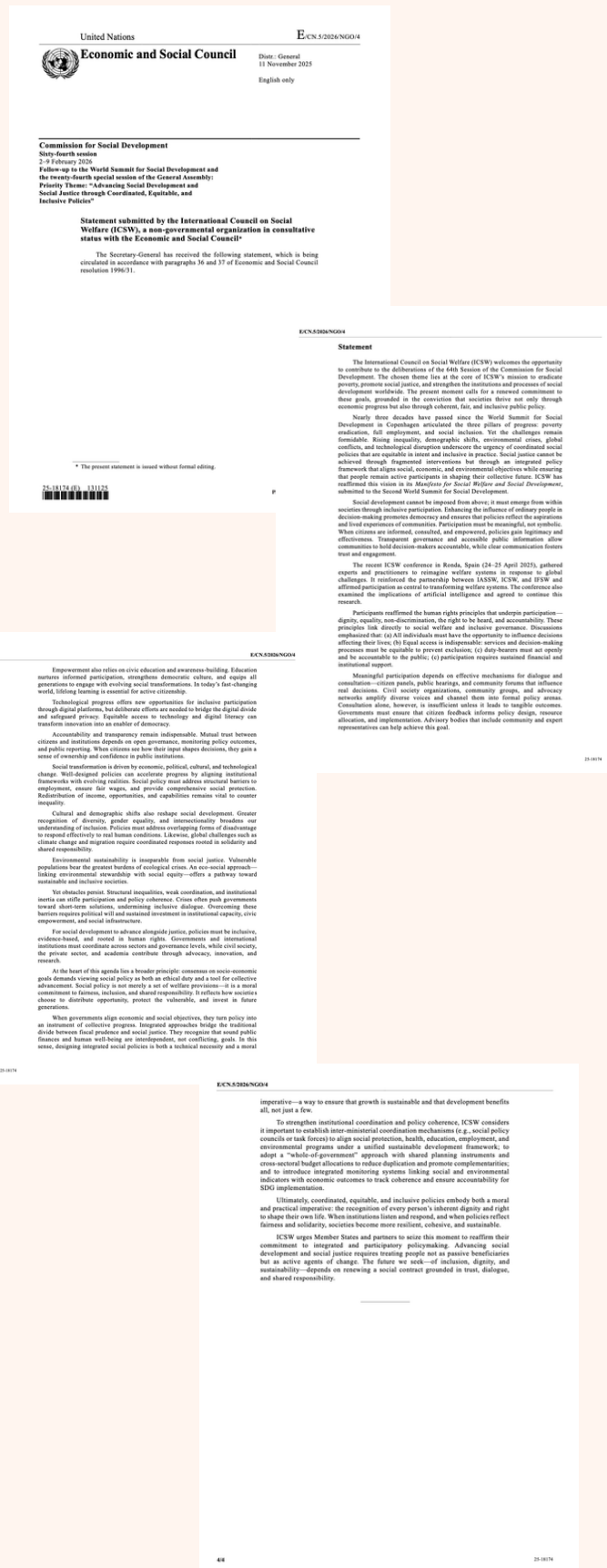
The statement further argues that social policy must tackle structural barriers to employment, ensure fair wages, and guarantee comprehensive social protection. It highlights the need to recognize cultural and demographic diversity, gender equality, and intersectionality, while also responding to global challenges such as migration and climate change. An “eco-social” approach is proposed, linking environmental sustainability with social justice and emphasizing that vulnerable populations disproportionately bear environmental risks.

ICSW identifies major obstacles to progress, including structural inequality, weak coordination among institutions, and short-term policy responses during crises. To overcome these barriers, the organization calls for stronger institutional capacity, political will, and investment in social infrastructure. Social policy is framed not merely as welfare provision but as a moral and ethical commitment to fairness, shared responsibility, and long-term societal resilience.

To enhance policy coherence, ICSW recommends establishing inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, adopting whole-of-government approaches with cross-sectoral planning and budgeting, and creating integrated monitoring systems linking social, economic, and environmental indicators. Such measures are seen as essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in a coherent and accountable manner.

In conclusion, ICSW calls on Member States and stakeholders to renew commitment to inclusive and participatory policymaking. Advancing social development and social justice requires recognizing individuals as active agents of change, strengthening the social contract through trust and dialogue, and ensuring that policies promote dignity, equality, and sustainability for all.

The full statement is attached.



Virtual Side Event of 64th session of the UN Commission for Social Development.

by Gloria Kirwan and Kristina Brown (Event Moderators)

On 4th February 2026, the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) in association with the International Association of the Schools of Social Work (IASSW) convened a virtual side event of the 64th Session of the UN Commission on Social Development. Titled “**Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Inclusive and Responsive Social Services**”. The Concept Paper developed by ICSW in advance of this event emphasized how ‘strengthening local participation has emerged as a critical pathway to improve policy effectiveness and enhance democratic governance’.

The event included presentations from the following speakers:

Professor Lynne Healy, Main Representative of IASSW to the United Nations opened the event with her presentation titled ‘Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Inclusive and Responsive Social Services’. **Professor Wing Hong Chui**, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, delivered a presentation titled ‘Working Together Beyond the Flames: Caring Hearts and Helping Hands in Promoting Resilience during Hong Kong’s Fire Crisis’. This was followed by a presentation from **Dr. Driss Guerraoui**, Former Secretary-General of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of Morocco and President, Open University of Dakhla, titled ‘Citizen participation and territorial dynamism: Lessons from Morocco’s experience of advanced regionalization’.

Dr Sergei Zelenev, President, International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), delivered a presentation titled ‘Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Responsive Social Services’. The final presentation, titled ‘The Role of the Korea Council on Social Welfare in Building Welfare Communities’, was delivered by **Mr. Sug Pyo Kim**, President, Daegu Council on Social Welfare, Republic of Korea.

The speakers’ presentations highlighted the benefits that flow from local participation, and the importance of ensuring that participation mechanisms are not only anchored within social and political processes but embedded in solutions that aim to meet the needs of different groups within society.

The session emphasized participation as a democratic principle grounded in dignity and social justice that improves policy relevance, trust, and alignment with real needs. It outlined complementary governance roles: central governments create participation frameworks and accountability, local authorities adapt services to communities, and frontline actors and civil society provide knowledge, outreach, and trust building. However, barriers such as limited capacity, resistance to power-sharing, weak communication, and tokenistic engagement persist. The speakers concluded that strengthening inclusive welfare systems requires institutionalized participation, investment in local capacity, transparent engagement mechanisms, and inclusion of marginalized groups, enabling community-centered services and more effective responses to social risks and crises. The event was delivered live online and was well attended with active engagement by attendees in the Q&A session.



From Survival to Social Rights: How Korea's Social Welfare Councils Are Building Community-Centered Welfare

by Kim Sug Pyo, President Daegu Council on Social Welfare,
Republic of Korea

In 1952, amid the devastation of the Korean War, the Korea National Council on Social Welfare was established with a singular mission: survival. The country was struggling to rebuild, families were displaced, poverty was widespread, and the concept of welfare was closely associated with emergency relief.

More than seventy years later, Korea's social welfare landscape has undergone a remarkable transformation. Welfare is no longer perceived as charity or temporary assistance. Instead, it is widely recognized as a fundamental social right – an essential condition for ensuring human dignity and inclusive development.

At the heart of this evolution lies a unique institutional model: Korea's Social Welfare Councils.

A Shift from Centralized Relief to Community Welfare

Korea's rapid economic growth in the later half of the 20th century – often referred to as the “Miracle on the Han River” – dramatically altered the nation's social fabric. Industrialization, urbanization, demographic shifts, and rising inequality introduced new social challenges.

By the 1990s, Korea began actively promoting decentralization policies, marking a decisive shift from a centrally driven welfare system toward a more decentralized model led by local governments. This transition catalyzed the emergence of “community welfare” as a core policy philosophy.

Recognizing the need for structured coordination across regions, 17 metropolitan councils on social welfare were established nationwide. However, policymakers and practitioners soon realized that authentic community welfare must be anchored even closer to residents – at the city, county, and district levels.

Since 1995, local councils on social welfare have been progressively established, reflecting the diverse socioeconomic realities of different communities.

A major milestone was reached in 2024, when amendments to the Social Welfare Services Act mandated the establishment of councils at the city, county, and district levels. Today, approximately 180 out of 228 local governments operate such councils, strengthening Korea's community-based welfare governance.

What Do Social Welfare Councils Do?

The most essential role of Korea's local Social Welfare Councils is deceptively simple yet profoundly impactful:

To convene diverse community stakeholders, identify local welfare challenges, mobilize resources, and build a collaborative welfare ecosystem.

In addition to providing certain services, councils play a pivotal role as coordinators, facilitators, and integrators, connecting public systems, private organizations, corporations and citizens.

This collaborative approach is reflected in several innovative programs.

1. “Good Neighbors”: Finding the hidden

Even in countries with advanced welfare systems, gaps inevitably remain. Some individuals fall outside eligibility criteria, hesitate to seek help, or experience complex vulnerabilities that are difficult to detect through administrative mechanisms.

Korea council's "Good Neighbors" program was designed precisely for these welfare blind spots.

Organized around community volunteers, the initiative empowers residents themselves to observe, listen and respond. Volunteers proactively monitor neighborhoods, identifying households facing economic hardship, social isolation or emotional distress.

Each year, approximately 40,000 underserved individuals are identified through this grassroots network. In response, private-sector resources valued at around USD 7 million are mobilized to provide tailored support.

Beyond material assistance, the program fosters something equally critical: social connection.

2. The Food Bank: From Surplus to Solidarity

Food insecurity remains a global concern, even in high-income economies. Simultaneously, significant volumes of edible food and usable goods are discarded due to logistical or commercial constraints.

Korea's Food Bank system transforms this paradox into an opportunity for social solidarity.

Donations from individuals, wholesalers, retailers and manufacturers are collected and redistributed to vulnerable populations and welfare facilities. Today, more than 10,000 companies participate.

In 2024 alone:

- Donations totaled approximately USD 187 million
- Over 300,000 vulnerable individuals received assistance
- Around 14,000 social welfare facilities benefited

The Food Bank is more than a redistribution mechanism – it is a model of cross-sector partnership linking businesses, civil society and welfare networks.

3. "Just Give": Immediate Support Without Barriers

Traditional welfare assistance often requires income verification, eligibility assessments, and administrative procedures. While necessary for accountability, these processes can delay support for individuals facing urgent crises.

The "Just Give" program offers an alternative pathway.

Unlike the traditional Food Bank, which primarily targets government-designated beneficiaries, "Just Give" provides immediate, low-threshold assistance – such as basic food and daily necessities – without income criteria or lengthy application processes.

Currently piloted at 104 locations, the program prioritizes responsiveness and accessibility. Plans are underway to scale the initiative nationwide by 2027. This approach reflects an emerging global conversation: how to balance administrative rigor with human-centered flexibility.

4. Engaging Business: The Corporate Social Responsibility Center

Corporations are increasingly recognized as key actors in addressing social challenges. Yet many companies struggle to identify credible partners, effective strategies or locally relevant initiatives.

Korea National Council's Corporate Social Responsibility(CSR) Center aims to close this gap. The Center provides CSR-related information and consulting, offer training programs for corporate managers, promote recognition and awards for exemplary CSR activities and facilitate partnerships between business and community welfare actors.

Through the institutionalization of CSR engagement, councils facilitate the alignment of corporate contributions with authentic community needs, transcending mere ad hoc philanthropy.

Vertical Structure, Horizontal Collaboration

Korea's Social Welfare Councils operate within a vertical delivery system extending from the national level to local communities. This structure ensures policy coherence, information flow and institutional continuity.

Simultaneously, councils emphasize horizontal collaboration across private welfare organizations, professional associations and civil society actors.

Professional organizations may focus on specific populations – such as children, older persons or persons with disabilities. However, when cross-cutting challenges arise, councils act as convening platforms.

For example, council coordinate the joint development of private-sector welfare policy agendas, which are then proposed to political parties and government agencies. In doing so, councils amplify collective voices while preserving sectoral expertise.

Looking Ahead

As Korea confronts the realities of a super-aged society, changing family structures and evolving social expectations, the role of Social Welfare Councils continues to expand.

The path forward centers on deepening local participation, strengthening community welfare ecosystems, enhancing cross-sector partnerships and advancing social justice and inclusive development.

From its origins in wartime survival to its present-day focus on rights and community empowerment, Korea's experience underscores a fundamental lesson:

Sustainable welfare is not built by government alone. It is co-created by communities.



Citizen Participation and Regional Dynamism: *Lessons from Morocco's Experience of Advanced Regionalization* by Driss Guerraoui, President of the Open University of Dakhla, Morocco

The reform of advanced regionalization in Morocco represents one of the most ambitious governance transformations undertaken in recent decades. Built on the conviction that territorial development cannot be effectively managed through centralized decision-making alone, the reform aims to reconcile economic growth, democratic participation, social cohesion, and sustainability through a stronger regional framework. After nearly a decade of implementation, Morocco's experience offers valuable lessons on the relationship between citizen participation and regional dynamism, as well as the challenges involved in translating institutional reforms into meaningful democratic practice.

I. Reasons Behind the Reform of Advanced Regionalization

The choice of advanced regionalization reflects a structural response to profound transformations affecting governance and development. At least five major reasons explain why Morocco adopted this approach.

First, the increasing complexity of modern governance has revealed the limitations of centralized state management. National governments often struggle to respond effectively to the diverse needs of local populations. Issues such as employment, education, healthcare, housing, transport, environmental protection, and cultural development require solutions adapted to local realities. As resources become more constrained and social demand expands both in quantity and quality, regional structures emerge as a more suitable scale for policymaking and implementation.

Second, the regional framework offers significant opportunities for participatory management and local governance. Regions can involve citizens, local actors, and civil society organizations more directly in development processes. This proximity to citizens strengthens democratic participation and makes it possible to reconcile economic development with political inclusion. Advanced regionalization thus becomes not only an administrative reform but also a democratic project aimed at improving the responsiveness and legitimacy of public institutions.

Third, regionalization creates the conditions for integrated and comprehensive development models. Rather than fragmented sectoral approaches designed at the national level, regions can promote coordinated strategies that combine economic planning, social policy, environmental sustainability, and territorial cohesion. This integrated approach enables territories to capitalize on their specific strengths while addressing their unique challenges.

Fourth, the reform reflects the growing role of new actors in territorial development. Beyond public authorities, socio-professional organizations, civil society groups, local networks, and innovative economic actors increasingly contribute to development initiatives. These actors operate in areas such as environmental protection, social rights, microcredit, local solidarity economies, and cultural innovation. Regionalization allows these networks to become active partners in shaping development strategies, leveraging territorial advantages such as natural resources, human capital, logistical infrastructure, and strategic geographic positioning.

Finally, the regional level provides an ideal space for experimentation and innovation. Regional actors possess local knowledge and territorial intelligence that enable them to test new solutions in economic, institutional, and social governance. Through innovation and collaboration, regions can develop competitive clusters capable of adapting to globalization and economic liberalization while maintaining social balance.

Guided by these considerations, Morocco created a model based on twelve regions, implemented following direct universal suffrage elections in September 2015. The reform sought to combine democratic legitimacy with decentralized decision-making and territorial development.

II. Foundations of the Reform

The Moroccan model of advanced regionalization rests on several foundational principles designed to ensure both effectiveness and accountability.

A key element is the transfer of broad powers to elected representatives at municipal, provincial, and regional levels. This approach recognizes local democracy as a cornerstone of development. At the same time, relations between the state and the regions are structured through contractual agreements, aiming to balance decentralization with national cohesion.

Another essential pillar is responsible governance. Mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, control, and accountability were introduced to guarantee the transparent management of regional affairs. Dedicated bodies, such as regional courts of auditors, play a critical role in overseeing the use of financial and natural resources, ensuring that public administration remains accountable to citizens.

Participatory governance forms the third foundation. The reform seeks to institutionalize citizen dialogue through three constitutionally recognized bodies representing women, young people, and the economic sphere. By granting these bodies a legal and constitutional basis, the reform aimed to strengthen citizen participation and enhance the inclusiveness of regional decision-making.

These participatory mechanisms pursue several objectives: reinforcing citizens' trust in local institutions, encouraging ownership of regional development projects, fostering public support, enhancing civic engagement, and ensuring long-term sustainability through stakeholder commitment. The underlying philosophy is clear: development cannot succeed without active citizen participation and collective ownership.

III. Lessons Learned After a Decade of Implementation

After approximately ten years, Morocco's experience reveals both significant progress and persistent challenges. An objective assessment highlights several shortcomings while also offering guidance for future improvements.

1. Current Shortcomings

One of the main challenges lies in the effectiveness of citizen participation. While institutional structures exist, meaningful participation often remains uneven and sometimes symbolic rather than genuinely influential. The gap between formal participation mechanisms and real citizen influence remains a concern.

Another issue is inequality in participation across regions. Several factors shape the level and quality of citizen engagement, including educational attainment, political culture, the maturity of local actors, political will, and respect for individual and collective freedoms. Regions with stronger social capital and institutional capacity tend to perform better than others, leading to disparities in democratic practice.

Representativeness also poses difficulties. Ensuring that participatory bodies truly reflect the diversity of local populations is an ongoing challenge. Marginalized groups may still face barriers to effective inclusion, despite formal representation mechanisms.

Finally, public trust in elected institutions remains fragile. Trust is closely linked to transparency, accountability, and the tangible results delivered by regional governance. Where citizens perceive limited impact or insufficient responsiveness, skepticism persists.

2. Lessons for the Future

Several lessons emerge from this experience. First, raising public awareness is essential. Citizens need to understand the purpose and opportunities of regionalization to engage meaningfully. Civic education and communication strategies must therefore accompany institutional reforms.

Second, better information sharing with stakeholders is necessary. Transparent access to information empowers citizens and civil society to participate more effectively and to hold institutions accountable.

Third, training elected officials is crucial. Decentralization requires new competencies in strategic planning, participatory governance, negotiation, and project management. Without adequate capacity building, regional authorities may struggle to exercise their expanded responsibilities.

Fourth, organizing stakeholders around concrete local projects can strengthen collaboration and improve development outcomes. Participation becomes more meaningful when citizens see tangible results connected to their everyday lives.

Fifth, digitalization and collaborative networking represent promising tools for the future. Digital platforms can expand access to information, facilitate consultation processes, and create more inclusive forms of participation. They can also help connect regional actors with national and international partners.

Finally, the role of global civil society coalitions is increasingly important. Transnational networks can provide expertise, share best practices, and support local actors in strengthening participatory governance and accountability frameworks. Regional reforms no longer occur in isolation; they benefit from international dialogue and collaboration.

Conclusion

Morocco's experience with advanced regionalization illustrates both the promise and complexity of decentralization as a pathway toward sustainable development and democratic renewal. The reform has created new institutional spaces for citizen participation, empowered regional actors, and opened opportunities for innovation and local dynamism. At the same time, the experience shows that institutional change alone is not enough. Effective participation requires trust, capacity, awareness, and continuous adaptation.

The key lesson is that regionalization is a long-term process rather than a single reform. Its success depends on strengthening democratic culture, building competent institutions, and ensuring that citizens move from being passive recipients of policies to active co-authors of development. As regions become laboratories of innovation and participation, their ability to harness local energies and collaborate with global civil society will determine the extent to which regional dynamism can truly contribute to national development and social cohesion.

Regaining Europe's Digital Sovereignty Is a Task for Every Democrat

by Philippe Narval,
Austria

Remarks Delivered at the Ronda Conference (April 2025)

In November 2016, I stood outside the Javits Center in New York City, standing in a slow-moving queue behind tight security. Inside, more than a thousand people had gathered to celebrate what many believed would be a historic moment—the election of the first female U.S. president. While we waited, I chatted with a couple next to me. They were relaxed, almost relieved. The night felt decided. And then it wasn't.

That was the first time Donald Trump was elected. For me, the shock did not fade into the background hum of “politics as usual.” It landed as a conviction: our democracy—*our* European democracies included—was in grave danger. I went on a research journey that took me across Europe and wrote a book on participatory democracy (published under the German title: “Die freundliche Revolution”)

Today I lead Lebenshilfe Austria, the umbrella organization of Austria's largest service provider for people with intellectual disabilities. We are, at our core, a human-rights organization. Our work is anchored in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and our daily business is a deceptively simple demand: dignity, participation, equality.

So why am I writing about democracy and digital sovereignty?

Because I have come to believe that the struggle for human rights and the struggle for democratic self-government now share a single battlefield: the digital space where we increasingly live our lives. If we keep living in the property of a handful of corporations—then all our carefully designed democratic procedures will be conducted inside a rented hall whose owner controls the doors, the lighting, and the sound system.



I Went Looking for Democracy’s Renewal—and Missed the Bigger Problem

In Ireland, I studied the Citizens’ Assembly on the Reform of the Constitution—an experiment that took two “hot potato” issues and proved something important: ordinary people, given time, information, and structure, can deliberate with seriousness and care. In Austria, I met a village mayor who developed his town through a participatory citizen dialogue. In Germany, I followed one of the largest experiments in urban regeneration through participation.

I built an argument—eventually a book—around a thesis that felt urgent: Europe needs a “friendly revolution,” a renewal of democracy with citizen participation at its core.

But I was misled. Or rather: I misled myself.

I treated the digital sphere primarily as a threat—an environment where manipulation happens, where attention is harvested, where outrage is rewarded. That is true. But I didn’t grasp the deeper reality: there is no going back. We are not returning to an offline public sphere where democracy can be repaired first and digitized later. We will spend substantial parts of our lives online.

So the real question becomes: **In which spaces, and under which rules?**

Do you use Gmail? Who relies on Google Maps? Who uses one, two, or more social media accounts—WhatsApp included?

Then comes the uncomfortable part: What would happen if your private correspondence on these platforms suddenly became public—or, worse, selectively exposed and used against you? What would happen if these services suddenly ceased to be available to you?

We usually answer these questions as if they were hypothetical. But dependencies are only invisible until someone pulls on them. Digital platforms no longer just sell ads. They act as gatekeepers to identity and participation. They decide who can speak, who can be found, what becomes visible, and which communities or individuals are quietly silenced by corporate choices no parliament voted on. And, equally important: they have become the public sphere. The new agora is privately owned.

January 2025: The Symbol We Should Not Ignore

When Trump returned to power, one image captured something that Europeans should take seriously: the sight of technology billionaires and CEOs placed prominently at the inauguration—figures like Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai, and Elon Musk, seated as if they were part of the state itself.

For Europe this is an existential warning. Our dependencies—email, cloud infrastructure, mobile operating systems, maps, social networks, advertising markets, identity systems—can be exploited. Not only commercially, but politically. We are at a stage where power over communication and information can be leveraged as coercion: through cancelling access, deplatforming, data exposure, targeted manipulation, or subtle changes to what entire populations see and believe.

And here is the mistake we must stop making: thinking of this as a *future* problem.

It is already here. The alignment of platform power and political power is not a conspiracy theory; it is the predictable result of concentrating the infrastructure of modern life in private hands.

Regulation Is Necessary—and Still Not Enough

Europe has regulated more boldly than most regions. That matters. But regulation alone is a defensive posture. It is like insisting on fire codes while continuing to live in a house built by someone else, on someone else’s land, with someone else holding the keys.

Digital sovereignty cannot be achieved through “better rules” alone, because rules do not create alternatives. If citizens and institutions have nowhere else to go, regulation becomes a negotiation with monopolies, not a guarantee of freedom. So we need something structural: independent, community-managed, publicly accountable digital infrastructures and platforms.

We need a European Digital Agora.

Not a single giant website. Not a government propaganda machine. Not a new bureaucracy. But a public, common-good-oriented digital space—built on democratic governance and designed for pluralism.

And we need it for the same reason we need public parks, public schools, and public broadcasting: because some goods are too foundational to outsource to profit-maximizing actors.

The “What If” Europe Needs to Ask Itself

What if Europe actively attracted international talent—engineers, designers, ethicists, organizers—who want to build alternative digital systems that are ethical and democratically legitimate?

Right now, much of the world’s digital imagination is trapped between Silicon Valley’s surveillance capitalism and authoritarian state control by China. Europe could offer a third model: civic digital infrastructure as a democratic project.

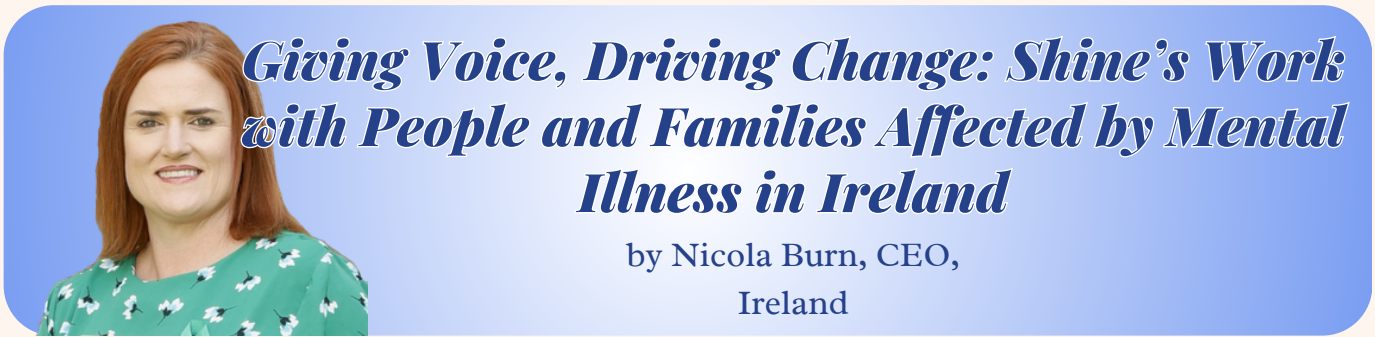
And what if we built a broad societal movement—across NGOs, unions, municipalities, universities, public broadcasters, and responsible businesses—dedicated explicitly to building this autonomous, democratic, space? The first step is simply to admit: **we are in trouble if we don’t act.**

This Is a Task for All Democratic Actors

When I say “digital sovereignty,” people often hear “geopolitics.” They imagine defense policy, trade policy, big-tech diplomacy. All of that is relevant. But sovereignty ultimately lives—or dies—in the everyday lives of citizens.

Democracy is in graver danger than ever, not because people suddenly stopped loving freedom, but because the infrastructure of public life is being rewired in ways that make freedom harder to practice. If we want democratic debate, sense-making, information, and even entertainment to remain compatible with human rights, we need digital public spaces where those things can happen without invisible coercion.

The European digital agora will not arrive in one big bang. It will be built piece by piece: a municipal platform here, a public-service social network there or an EU-wide procurement rule that favours open standards. That work starts with a decision: to stop accepting dependence as inevitable.



Giving Voice, Driving Change: Shine's Work with People and Families Affected by Mental Illness in Ireland

by Nicola Burn, CEO,
Ireland

Introduction

Shine is a national mental health organisation in Ireland working with people affected by mental illness, including individuals living with severe and enduring mental illness and their families and supporters. Founded almost 50 years ago by families responding to major gaps in care, Shine now delivers frontline recovery services alongside national advocacy, education, and stigma reduction programmes.

As a member of the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), Shine shares a commitment to social justice, human rights, and inclusive social policy. Our work is grounded in lived experience, co-production, and the principle that mental illness must be treated with the same seriousness, resourcing, and dignity as physical illness.

Who We Work with and Why

Despite progressive policy frameworks in Ireland, access to timely, consistent, and recovery oriented mental health services remains uneven. Families often provide long term care with limited recognition or support, while people living with mental illness face persistent stigma and social exclusion.

Shine's work focuses on:

- People living with mental illness, particularly psychosis and other severe mental illnesses
- Family members and supporters
- Professionals, employers, journalists, and policymakers who shape systems and public attitudes

We take a whole system view: individual recovery is inseparable from social inclusion, informed public discourse, and effective policy implementation.

Frontline Recovery and Family Support

Shine delivers recovery-oriented services across multiple regions in Ireland, including:

- One-to-one recovery support based on personal goals and self-defined recovery
- Family and supporter programmes that recognise families as partners in care
- Group based supports that reduce isolation and build peer connection

Demand for these services continues to grow, reflecting ongoing gaps in statutory provision and the central role of families in sustaining recovery.

Stigma Reduction, Education, and Media Engagement

Alongside direct services, Shine leads national programmes to reduce stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.

The **Green Ribbon Campaign**, Ireland's national mental health awareness campaign, with the green ribbon as its symbol, promotes informed public conversation through community engagement and cross sector partnerships.

Through our **Workplace Mental Health Programme**, Shine supports employers to better understand mental illness, implement reasonable accommodations, and foster inclusive organisational cultures.

Shine's Media Programme works closely with journalists and media professionals to improve reporting on mental illness and suicide. Training, fellowships, and awards promote accuracy, context, and ethical practice, recognising the powerful role of media in shaping public understanding.

Advocacy, Policy, and Lived Experience Leadership

Lived experience is central to Shine's approach. We support people with lived experience and family members to engage meaningfully with national mental health reform processes, focusing on whether policy commitments translate into real improvements in access, continuity, and quality of life.

Our advocacy is practical and evidence informed, grounded in everyday realities rather than abstract reform narratives.

A Lived Experience Perspective (Case Example)

"For the first time, someone spoke to me as a person, not a diagnosis." A family member described years of trying to support a loved one living with psychosis while navigating fragmented services and limited information. Engagement with Shine did not remove the challenges of mental illness, but it reduced isolation, restored confidence, and helped the family feel recognised rather than marginalised within the system.

This perspective reflects a consistent message in Shine's work: recovery is about dignity, participation, and social connection, not solely clinical outcomes.

Looking Ahead: Mental Illness as a Social Policy Issue

Shine's future priorities align closely with ICSW values of social protection, participation, equity, and human rights.

People affected by mental illness experience disproportionate social and economic disadvantage, including poverty, insecure housing, unemployment, and exclusion from community life. Families frequently absorb hidden care costs with little formal protection or recognition. Mental illness must therefore be understood not only as a health issue, but as a core social policy concern.

Shine works to bridge health and social policy by:

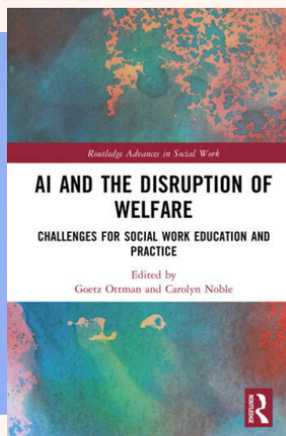
- Advocating for full recognition of mental illness within social protection and welfare systems
- Supporting participation of people with lived experience and families in policy design and oversight
- Challenging structural inequalities that limit access to care, information, employment, and inclusion

Through ICSW, Shine values the opportunity to share learning and contribute to international dialogue on these shared challenges. Strengthening participation, reinforcing social protection, and addressing inequality are essential if people affected by mental illness are to be supported not just to cope, but to belong and to thrive.



Shine is a national mental health organisation based in Ireland. More information is available at <https://www.shine.ie>

Publications in Focus



Book review: *AI and the Disruption of Welfare* *Challenges for Social Work Education and Practice*

by Emilio Díaz-de-Mera, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos,
Spain

Book review: Ottmann, Goetz and Noble, Carolyn (eds.) 2026. IA and the Disruption of Welfare. Challenges for Social Work Education and Practice. New York: Routledge. ISBN 9781032741123.

It is impossible to analyze citizen participation, the social welfare model, or the problems of exclusion in contemporary societies without analyzing the key role that technology plays in our societies, especially AI. In this regard, the book edited by Goetz Ottmann and Carolyn Noble, published in 2026, is a very relevant and welcome contribution in my view. Why? Because it places at the center of the debate the problem of power, the lack of neutrality of AI, and the real possibility that the power of AI could reinforce coercive practices in societies with serious problems of inequality. From a perspective based on what we might call critical, anti-oppressive social work, the chapters that make up this collective work allow us to delve deeper into the challenges we will face in the coming years, and which we are facing right now, even though we may not be fully aware of the consequences of the technologies we are implementing today.

The book consists of 22 chapters covering a multitude of intrinsically related topics. From the disruption of the welfare state (chapter 1) to the transformation of educational practices (chapter 22), it covers a multitude of urgent issues for social welfare: managerialism (chapter 2), the digitally enabled Carceral State (chapter 3), surveillance in the digital world (chapter 4), algorithms in social services (chapter 5), automatic algorithms and ethical principles (chapter 6), the coercive technological present of social work (chapter 7), AI in prisoner rehabilitation (chapter 8), Data Justice (chapter 9), AI and social work education (chapter 10), ethical implications for social work (chapter 11), AI and feminist discourse (chapter 12), AI and decolonization (chapter 13), the ethical challenges of AI and augmented virtual reality (chapter 14), AI and co-designed responses (chapter 15), the digital dimension of violence against women (chapter 16), challenges arising from digital partner violence (chapter 17), the digital divide and social work (chapter 18), AI and digital vulnerability (chapter 19), AI and ethics in social work (chapter 20), and preparing students to resist coercive AI in social work (chapter 21).

I found all the chapters in the book very thought-provoking. In particular, the anti-oppressive approach, the criticism of the coercive dimension inherent in the AI model we are implementing in our unequal societies, and a concept that I think frames very well the evolution from the network society (discussed by sociologist Manuel Castells in the 1990s) to the AI society: digital vulnerability (chapter 19 of the book, pp. 242-254, entitled: Digital vulnerability, Artificial Intelligence and coercive practices: Contributions from digital social work). The concept of digital vulnerability highlights the dark side of technological innovation, while also helping us to design inclusive strategies in an AI society. As highlighted in Chapter 19, “in order to address the coercive risks enhanced by AI, it is important to strengthen digital social work (...). And we must enhance it by strengthening the participation of citizens in (a) the design of technological tools, in (b) the implementation and evaluation of digital intervention projects and programs, and in (c) the development of an AI model based on human rights and the ethical principles of social work” (p. 252). I enjoyed reading this book, which deals with such a topical issue, and I recommend it to you—it’s well worth reading.

Emilio Díaz-de-Mera, associate professor of Social Work, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (URJC) (Madrid, Spain)
emilio.diazdemera@urjc.es
<https://servicios.urjc.es/pdi/ver/emilio.diazdemera>

More Activity at ICSW- Save the Date!

SWSD 2026 conference in Kenya
26-29 June, 2026

<https://swsd2026.or.ke/>



<https://www.icsw.org>

Contributions to the newsletter are welcome!

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News Editor: **Antonio López Peláez, Executive Director, ICSW alopez@icsw.org**

ICSW - International Council on Social Welfare. Office number 34.

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, National Distance Education University (UNED).

C/ Obispo Trejo 2, 28040 Madrid (Spain).