



ICSW

Social Welfare and Social Development Policies for the New Era

ICSW Manifesto for Submission to
the Second World Summit
for Social Development 2025

Preamble

We, the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), submit this manifesto to the United Nations, re-affirming our dedication to advancing human dignity, well-being, social justice, and inclusive policies worldwide. The outcomes of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) in Copenhagen set a transformative agenda that emphasized structural solutions to major social challenges of the time. Yet, as the first quarter of the twenty-first century draws to a close, the world continues to grapple with an array of complex, interconnected, and quite often, cascading challenges—socioeconomic instability, environmental crises, rapid technological advancements, and a deepening mistrust of institutions.

The profound shifts and disruptions across these domains have become defining features of this new era, demanding adaptive strategies and innovative policy responses.

The growing inequality within and between countries has profound social, economic, and political consequences, exacerbating social divisions and reducing overall social cohesion. As income disparities widen, individuals in lower-income groups face increasing difficulties in accessing essential services such as education, healthcare, and housing. This creates a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break, leading to entrenched poverty and limiting social mobility. Moreover, as economic opportunities become concentrated among the wealthy, the middle class shrinks, leading to greater polarization and weakening the social fabric that holds societies together. The consolidation of political power by the super-rich amplifies their influence over governance and enables further wealth accumulation, posing a threat to democracy, human rights, and social stability.

The urgency to fulfill the commitments of the Copenhagen Summit has never been more pressing. The upcoming Second World Summit for Social Development 2025 in Doha, Qatar is not a mere opportunity; it is a summons—a call to measure and evaluate global progress, to take stock of our failures, to close the gaps in implementation, and to align our aspirations with the realities of today, as well as the challenges and opportunities of the future.

We need a fresh start, charting a renewed path forward.

The Current Landscape

Reports from ICSW-affiliated organizations worldwide highlight the adverse impacts of climate change on food security, health, and human life. Severe material and social deprivation continues to rise globally, affecting even high-income countries and worsening conditions for large segments of populations, including disadvantaged groups and the middle class. Rising living costs and increasing inequality have pushed millions into poverty, even in regions experiencing economic growth. These imbalances demand more than temporary measures. They underscore the urgent need for inclusive, people-centered policies that transcend and build resilience to short-term crises.

The shifting political landscape, marked by political polarization and the disproportionate impact of profit-driven social media, particularly among younger voters, has introduced significant uncertainty in governance. In many countries, voter dissatisfaction with unmet promises and political compromises has exacerbated challenges to social cohesion and welfare provision.[1]

Models of democracy, embedded in foundational principles and reflective of how nations achieve well-being, stability, and social cohesion, must inherently acknowledge the cultural distinctiveness and unique social environments of societies. When examined comprehensively—beyond a narrow focus on electoral systems—these models should be tailored by individual countries to the traditions, cultures, and political contexts. Such an approach ensures that democratic frameworks resonate with the lived experiences and values of their constituents, fostering legitimacy and resilience. Solidarity, defined as the social bonds that unite individuals within a community, is a fundamental value that must be nurtured and passed down through generations.

To fulfill its potential, the media must prioritize the promotion of human rights-based policies, aligning with the principles established by the United Nations in the social sphere. Upholding these priorities is crucial, even amidst adverse political developments such as electoral volatility and the rise of populism. In today's digital era, "clip thinking"—a visible trend of individuals consuming information in fragmented, easily digestible formats—has emerged

[1] The term welfare refers throughout this Manifesto to the overall well-being of populations, and not to specific benefits that may be given to persons in need.

as a prevailing norm. While it offers convenience and rapid dissemination, it often undermines factual analysis and critical thinking and allows shallow engagement. This phenomenon, amplified by social media platforms and digital technologies, is further exacerbated by information bubbles, pervasive “info-noise,” and other distortions that color the modern media landscape. These dynamics raise significant concerns about the prevalence of echo chambers and the erosion of analytical discourse. In this context, the media, as the “fourth power,” have a pivotal role to play. It is obvious that fact-checked, transparent, engaging, and secure social media services are crucial in fostering informed discussions and civic engagement. A collaborative public-private initiative is necessary to support and enhance these efforts.

The issue of social guarantees within social contracts—the obligations of governments to provide for the well-being of their citizens—is intricately tied to the provision of social welfare and the policies enshrined in a nation’s fundamental legal norms. This matter is deeply rooted in national understandings of citizenship and its social dimensions, reflecting the social contract between the state and its people. A social contract grounded in citizen participation is essential for legitimizing institutions and ensuring the sustainability of welfare systems. Social policies, in turn, are shaped by the complex interplay of social, historical, cultural, and economic evolution. These dynamics highlight the need for adaptive, context-sensitive governance that responds effectively to the shifting needs and aspirations of highly diverse populations. Across many nations, there is growing recognition that governments must play a more proactive role in both supporting and regulating the private sector, always prioritizing the public good.

By integrating these insights, societies can craft governance models that not only address immediate challenges but also lay the foundation for sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development. Economic indicators, such as GDP, unemployment rates, and inflation, provide valuable insights into a nation’s financial health, but they are not sufficient measures of social well-being. These metrics fail to capture essential aspects of human life, including health, education, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. Moreover, economic indicators do not account for the quality of social services, civic engagement, or life satisfaction, which are critical to a thriving society. To gain a comprehensive understanding of well-being, policymakers must complement economic data with social, psychological, and environmental measures that reflect the lived experiences of individuals and communities.

This raises critical questions:

- What kind of social policies are needed for the New Era?
- How can policymakers balance moral imperatives with pragmatism to prioritize and achieve social goals?
- And how can policy priorities be reassessed or adjusted without undermining these goals in a rapidly changing world?

Despite progress in some sectors, social welfare policies often remain confined to addressing immediate needs rather than being aimed at driving systemic change. Overemphasis on short-term expenditures risks creating dual systems: one for the marginalized, publicly funded and overstretched, and another for the privileged, private and exclusive. Such divides deepen inequality and fracture social cohesion. Additionally, government spending cuts, often necessitated by budget constraints, have diminished resources for social protection, even as demand continues to grow. In many countries, debt policies create a vicious cycle in which financial constraints and external pressures hinder governments from fulfilling their human rights obligations. Austerity measures driven by debt often result in public discontent and social unrest.

The ICSW, a global non-governmental organization with strong national presence and a long and proud history of advocating for integrated social policy and effective welfare programmes, emphasizes that budget allocations for social welfare are not merely expenses but vital investments in the future; moreover, those investments are critically founded on social solidarity. Most social development objectives and goals are achievable if and only if there is political will. As the adage goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way"—provided society recognizes the critical importance of these goals. The way forward lies in the political courage to prioritize these investments and to recognize their transformative power.

Citizen participation is at the heart of effective and responsive social services. Participation builds transparency and trust, and fosters a sense of shared responsibility, ensuring that social services address real challenges and needs rather than being shaped by assumptions. Furthermore, civil society serves as a vital platform for amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable, ensuring their concerns are heard in public discourse. Establishing or strengthening formal mechanisms that provide citizens with regular opportunities to contribute to decision-making in a transparent and constructive way makes participatory processes more inclusive and effective.

Core Principles

1. People-Centered Social Welfare

Social welfare programmes and services should be recognized as fundamental to creating a humane society. Enhancing human well-being and social welfare should be central to economic development. While specific legal statutes and definitions may differ across countries, the universal goal remains to promote human development, ensure security, and foster empowerment. A shared commitment to mutual support and collective responsibility remains fundamental across all major regions of the world. Furthermore, this is consistent with the concurrent objective of achieving universal social protection (USP), encompassing protective, preventive, and developmental functions.

2. Integration of Social and Economic Policies

Social welfare policies are essential for individual and community well-being but must be integrated with broader economic policies. A comprehensive framework is needed to include poverty reduction, full employment, universal social protection, and access to essential services. Neglecting the social dimensions of economic policies undermines sustainable and equitable development. Governments must move beyond viewing social policies as safety nets, recognizing their role in fostering sustainable economic environments, particularly in light of the climate crisis threatening communities worldwide.

3. Innovative Social Policies

Today's complex challenges demand innovative, participatory, and flexible social policies to address the converging crises. Governments must embed social dimensions into macroeconomic policies from the outset, ensuring that economic development benefits all members of a society. Domestic policies must address demographic transitions, such as migrations and aging populations, by fostering an intergenerational focus and strengthening solidarity between generations. We must promote dialogue between generations, as we seek to find appropriate forms and methods of communication for older and younger generations. At the same time, national policies must ensure that the rapid digital transformation—driven by the exponential growth of information and communication technology—bridges digital divides rather than creating new ones, empowering individuals rather than marginalizing them.

Key Domains for Action

Four priority domains should guide future strategies:

A. Addressing the Social Consequences of Climate Change

Climate change is not an isolated phenomenon; it is a magnifier of vulnerabilities. Its impacts frequently fall most acutely on those least equipped to adapt. Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable regions, particularly in South Asia and Southern Africa, threatening agriculture, health, and livelihoods. Integrating environmental sustainability into economic and social policies is essential to protect communities from climate-induced challenges. It is imperative for all stakeholders, including civil society, to concentrate on full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, strengthening solidarity and collective action.

B. Promoting Jobs and Inclusive Economic Growth

Social development cannot flourish without economic development that benefits all; inclusive economic growth is a prerequisite for sustainability. Policies must prioritize marginalized groups—women, youth, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities—ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities, services and livelihoods. Governments possess a vast toolbox: progressive taxation, labour laws and fair wages, and strategic investments in healthcare, education, and housing, which can narrow wealth gaps and create pathways to stability and social cohesion.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies, including generative artificial intelligence (AI), presents both opportunities and challenges for policymakers and civil society. Digital transformation has the potential to enhance and diversify citizen participation. However, countries must navigate the complexities of digital transformation while addressing its social consequences, such as job displacement and wealth concentration. Implementing robust social protection measures for those affected by job losses and ensuring fair taxation of AI-driven profits so as to redistribute benefits across society are essential considerations.

C. Universal Social Protection

Social security is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). We urge governments to build comprehensive systems that provide security at every stage of life. Basic guarantees for universal access to essential health care and income guarantees in situations of unemployment, old age, childcare, disability, widowhood and orphanhood, sickness and maternity, are measures to safeguard individuals against life's uncertainties while fostering mental and physical well-being and empowering their participation in the nation's productive activities. Universal social protection is not charity; it is founded on justice and represents the single best investment a society can make in its population.

D. Human Empowerment

A. Policies must empower people to participate fully in society's economic and social dimensions. This requires promoting quality education, vocational training, and lifelong learning, particularly for women, youth, minorities, and individuals with disabilities. Gender equality, job creation, and support for sustainable industries like renewable energy and sustainable agriculture are vitally important.

Education is essential not only in fulfilling the basic commitments of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but also in raising educational standards and promoting high-quality learning. It plays a crucial role in fostering critical thinking and addressing the growing challenges of disinformation and misinformation, which have become pressing concerns in today's world.

Directions for the Future

Social welfare policies must evolve into catalysts for equity and justice, integrating social objectives into macroeconomic frameworks embracing environmental dimensions and fostering international cooperation. Evidence-based proposals can help governments address poverty, unemployment, and inequality through effective social welfare policies. These policies must enhance human potential, paving the way for a just, inclusive, and sustainable global system.

The Second World Summit for Social Development cannot be a mere exercise in rhetoric. It must be a turning point. Pragmatic solutions and constructive political compromises are essential in order to address the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, protect vulnerable groups, and reverse declines in indicators of well-being. However, let us be clear: political compromises must not come at the expense of people's dignity and rights. It is necessary to strengthen participatory dynamics-- a key element in guaranteeing citizens' rights.

Multilateralism and Collaboration

Collaboration between stakeholders, both nationally and internationally, is critical to addressing shared global challenges. Equally critical is fostering this collaboration internationally, where sharing best practices allows countries to learn from each other's successes and setbacks in social policy implementation. Regional cooperation, often facilitated by multilateral institutions, enables policymakers to address cross-border challenges such as infectious disease control and educational inequities worsened by migration and poverty. While multilateral institutions and agreements face significant challenges, it is essential to recognize that global challenges require global solutions.

Multilateralism is indispensable for addressing shared global challenges, and ICSW strongly supports multilateral collaboration in social sectors and beyond. For example, countries with successful reforms in health, education, or social protection can serve as models that other nations adapt to their contexts. As ICSW's experience demonstrates, regional multilateral agreements can promote uniform standards, encourage resource-sharing and the transfer of technological and human expertise, and help prevent disparities arising from differing national capacities. Ultimately, the effectiveness of multilateralism in shaping social policy depends on the commitment of nations to implement agreed-upon standards equitably and to leverage multilateral support efficiently. Through such actions, countries can strengthen their social infrastructure and expand inclusive opportunities for all citizens.

The establishment of robust intergovernmental mechanisms, such as regular ministerial meetings, can enhance global collaboration and ensure accountability in implementing social welfare policies. These meetings should be well-informed, using cutting-edge methodologies and procedures. By collecting accurate data and relevant forecasts, making rational choices, and undertaking effective operational programming, these mechanisms should promote innovation, equity, and efficiency. We firmly believe that social welfare must fulfill its transformation from a reactive measure into a strategic tool for sustainable development.

Global Collaboration and Coordination

Global collaboration and coordination are essential for ensuring equitable access to fundamental social public goods and services. A robust international platform could serve as a catalyst for such efforts, facilitating universal health care access and strengthening global health security, particularly in combating pandemics. It could also promote quality education by balancing local content with global standards, ensuring adequate financing, teacher training, and access to learning resources. Additionally, a global social security system could guarantee social protection floors for all, while enforcing international labor standards would uphold fair and just working conditions. Effective global water management would further safeguard this critical resource, ensuring sustainability and equitable distribution.

By fostering cooperation between governmental and intergovernmental agencies, such a platform could also facilitate the exchange of research and good practices in social welfare as well as coordinate with key social sectors.

In this light **the revival of Annual meetings of Ministers of Social Welfare**, leveraging platforms such as the UN Commission for Social Development or standalone events, can give the required boost to global cooperation in social welfare issues, promoting human dignity, well-being, inclusion, and social justice, translating commitments made at Copenhagen Summit and those emerging from the Second Social Summit in 2025 into concrete actions.

ICSW is a founding member of the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors and actively supports this global civil-society initiative bringing together more than 130 civil society organizations worldwide and aimed at achieving universal social protection. We stand firmly together with social development practitioners, social workers, educators, academics who prioritize attention to and action on social security and human well-being. Together, we aim to achieve universal social protection that include child-sensitive programmes and schemes. We strongly advocate for the initiation of practical discussions at the UN to develop **a binding international instrument for Universal Social Protection**.

ICSW believes it is crucial for the international community to embrace forward-thinking, equitable and inclusive social policies globally, regionally, nationally and locally. Human dignity and worth must guide these policies, which should address the realities of today's interconnected world. Addressing the root causes of mistrust is essential to breaking the vicious cycles it perpetuates. A well-informed, active, and engaged civil society is essential for socially sustainable development, democracy, and the realization of human rights. Investing in a strong, diverse, and independent civil society creates the foundation for these goals. Civil society also plays a critical role in strengthening security, particularly during crises, where its ability to provide humanitarian aid is indispensable.

Designing realistic, yet bold and sustainable social policies is imperative in the current context. Effective social policies that meaningfully engage citizens, local communities, regional entities, and the global community are vital for promoting sustainable development and social cohesion.

ICSW stands ready to support this endeavour.



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Thank You