

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

1. Introduction

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

2. Preamble

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

3. Rationale for Participation

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

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

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

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

4. Guiding Principles for Meaningful Participation

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

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

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

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

5. Examples of Good Practice

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

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

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

Three Levels of Participation:

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

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

6. Role of Local Governments

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

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

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

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

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

7. Making Use of Digitalization Opportunities

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

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

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

8. Recommendations to Local Governments

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

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

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

9. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Resources

Sherry R Arnstein: A Ladder of Citizen Participation. AIP Journal July 1969, pp. 216-224

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) [General comment No. 14: The right to the highest attainable level of health](#) (OHCHR 2000)

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

Council of Europe Citizen participation: A code of good practice to respond to current challenges - Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2019)

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

OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes Report 2022

https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-guidelines-for-citizen-participation-processes_f765caf6-en.html

Ronald Wiman: The Disability Dimension in Development Action. Manual on Inclusive Planning. STAKES for and on behalf the UN. Helsinki 1997, 2000, &2001 .
https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/publications/FF-DisabilityDim0103_b1.pdf