

# **Ronda Declaration 2025**

**On Meaningful Participation, Inclusive Social Welfare, and Democratic Local Governance  
Adopted on 25 April 2025, Ronda, Spain**

By

**International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)**

## **Introduction**

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

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

## **Context and Imperatives**

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

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

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

## **Vision and Values**

The Ronda Declaration envisions a future where:

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

### **Guiding Principles**

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

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

### **Key Commitments**

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

#### **1. Promote Participation as a Foundation of Welfare Systems**

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

#### **2. Enable Inclusive Digital and Intergenerational Engagement**

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

- Promote intergenerational dialogue and cooperation for community resilience.

### **3. Strengthen Local Administration as Pillars of Democratic Governance**

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

### **4. Invest in Competency and Practice Sharing**

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

## **Pillars of Action**

### **1. Participation as a Universal Right and Social Asset**

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

### **2. Operationalizing Participation Across Welfare Systems**

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

### **3. Leveraging Digital Tools for Inclusion, Not Exclusion**

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

### **4. Promoting Intergenerational and Intersectional Dialogue**

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

## **5. Institutionalizing Participation Through Legal and Structural Reform**

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

### **Priority Recommendations**

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

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

### **A Call for Global Solidarity**

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

### **Our Commitment**

We, the signatories of this Declaration, commit to:

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

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

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