

# IFS Helsinki Declaration on democracy

In June 2018 people from different Settlement Houses and Neighborhood centers came together to explore the state of civil societies and democracy at “Democracy – is it in Danger?” Conference in Helsinki. They were representatives of a global network of 4,000 organizations and hundreds of thousands of active citizens, volunteers, students, and professionals in neighborhoods of nearly 30 countries. This declaration was prepared by the IFS Board based on the understanding of the realities of these local communities.

***We see Democracy** as a value and as an orientation for people and local communities to influence their lives. In this regard democracy is something more than only a governing principle of societies and a foundation for political representation. We understand democracy as a mindset that puts people and communities at the centre of decision making. At the heart of this understanding is the respect for human rights and diversity - respect for the dignity, worth and humanity of all people is essential for democracy.*

*We see also democracy used as scapegoat and smoke screen for manipulative purposes. We want to pay attention that democracy as concept is exploited for undemocratic purposes. We see democracy taking various forms in various locations. Despite the differences of the societies the importance of civil society and people's participation is inevitable.*

*We have witnessed an alarming rise of Autocracy and its impact on Democratic Societies. We are concerned the deterioration of the civil societies worldwide. We experience that Democracy is not at its best exercised as power of the majority. The lines of majority and minority can be transcended when majority is concerned for the minorities participation and rights and vice versa. Democracy and the respect for diversity are closely intertwined. There is a need for a change how peoples' and communities' role is seen in relation to Democracy. Change the narrative concerning democracy and create the conditions for the people's' ability to together find solutions: a great variety of diverse people can discuss, achieve and convey collective shared positions.*

**We demand / highlight that:**

- *democracy must be defended - democracy that guarantees equal access to voting, fair access to information and funding*
- *there is a urgent need to focus on those who feel excluded by democracy*
- *Current migration issues should be debated in an informed and factual manner and people in migration should be portrayed/communicated in balanced and respectful way.*
- *The dehumanizing tendencies towards vulnerable people and the threat of this dehumanisation to democracy should be opposed*
- *equitable and fair access to participation increases trust and cohesion*

## **Draft IFS Helsinki Declaration on democracy**

*IFS movement and the settlement houses and neighborhood centers are strong cornerstones of communities, community action and advocacy. The centers foster strong and reciprocal relationships and are places of empowerment and participation in shaping society.*

***IFS member organisations, in order to achieve social justice, are dedicated to***

- *strengthen the power of communities and support the shift of power from centralized entities to local, communities and people*
- *create understanding, dialogue and safe places to discuss, debate controversial issue and appreciate differences of opinion.*
- *confront inequalities and help to build a civil society open for diverse kind of people and preserve the focus on accepting freedom of thinking differently and simultaneously focus on understanding ways to foster acceptance*
- *encourage people to stand up for Freedom and Social justice*
- *look at/observe/watch democracy and where the power lies*
- *support the less powerful .. for access?*
- *support the indigenous peoples rights*
- *gain a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of their communities and their aspirations for meaningful change*
- *demand for a change*
- *create welcoming places when needed for people in migration because of wars, social unrest and climate changes and also paths for resettlement.*
- *build up our capacity to gather our networks and resources and to act when needed*
- *proof and develop of Democratic education and Lifelong learning*
- *sustainable development goals and Paris Climate Agreement in action glocally*
- *respect and act to UN Human Rights declaration*
- *balance the possibilities and harms of social media, digitalization, polarization glocally.*

***The Demand for change (for policy makers)***

- *guarantee democratic rights (in certain place the constitution can be changed to threaten these very democratic values and rights)*
- *provide support for civil society organisations*
- *open and unconditional support for CSOs*
- *establish agreements between civil society and government*
- *ensure that democracy is incorporated in the school curricula*
- *authorities support to civil democratic organisations that are not too tied to specific outcomes*
- *democracy is in danger: the civil societies role to stand up for democracy should not be threatened but supported by the authorities.*
- *need for transparency: the large social media and internet service providers involvement with political influencing should be investigated thoroughly*

The International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (IFS) is an association of national, regional and local organizations working to strengthen communities around the world. Its mission is to build an inclusive global community by empowering, inspiring and connecting people who are working locally for social justice.