

# IFS Declaration on Democracy

In June 2018, people from settlement houses and neighbourhood centers from around the world came together to explore the state of civil societies and democracy in a conference of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS) in Helsinki:

Democracy – is it in Danger? IFS represents a global network of 4,000 organizations and hundreds of thousands of active citizens, volunteers, students, and professionals in neighbourhoods of nearly 30 countries.

Based on the understanding of the realities that our members worldwide are facing, this declaration was prepared by the IFS Board of Directors and presented to the participants at the Helsinki conference.

We, the members of the International Federation of Settlements, agree that democracy is more than a method for governing organizations and for ensuring political representation in state governance. Our vision for democracy is founded on respect for human rights and diversity and a belief in the dignity and worth of all people, worldwide. It is a set of values, an orientation and a practise that empowers people and local communities and puts them at the centre of decisions about conditions that affect their lives.

We are distressed to see that some of the methods of democratic decision-making have been used as a smoke screen in the pursuit of undemocratic ends. The processes of shaping public opinion and staging elections have been manipulated for undemocratic purposes. We are witnessing an alarming rise of autocracy and chauvinism. We are concerned that civil societies are deteriorating and are under attack by some governments in order that they may secure power.

As a federation of settlement organizations, we are directly witnessing the mass displacement of people that is, in large part, a result of this deterioration of civil society. The lack of information and, unfortunately, the sometimes intentional misinformation about people in migration is rampant and further marginalizes and victimizes them.

We are witnessing indigenous peoples worldwide being stripped of their languages and cultures and pushed from their ancestral territories.

Democracy is not at its best when it is exercised as the simple power of the majority of public opinion. It is urgent that we recognize that democracy and respect for diversity are closely intertwined and that we find effective ways to include the voices of those who are excluded by current democratic practises. Equitable and fair access to participation increases trust and cohesion. We are confident that a great diversity of people can meet, discuss, achieve and convey collective positions, and find solutions to the issues that challenge us.

Settlements and neighbourhood centres provide a place where the understanding and workings of democracy can be experienced. Through our work we contribute to this vision every day.

### We declare that:

- Democracy must be defended.
- Democracy must guarantee equal access to voting as well as equitable access to information and resources.
- We will settle for nothing less than fair representation of the full diversity of human voices in democratic decision-making.
- Migration issues must be debated in an informed and factual manner and people in migration must be treated with understanding and respect.
- Democracy, as described here, provides a hopeful future for all humanity.