ICSW NEWS
International Council on Social Welfare

Welcome Letter

by Antonio López Peláez, ICSW Executive Director

Dear ICSW members, friends, and interested readers,

Welcome to the May 2026 issue of our newsletter.

This coming June, we will gather in Nairobi, Kenya, for The Joint Conference on Social Work, Education, and Social Development: HARAMBEE, TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE AND SHARED FUTURE (https://swsd2026.or.ke/), June 26–29, 2026. For ICSW, this conference represents an important opportunity to come together, discuss, and plan our activities for the coming years. During this time, we will hold our General Assembly and strengthen our bonds with one another, as well as between ICSW, IFSW, and IASSW. We will also host a seminar on citizen participation and social welfare, as well as a roundtable discussion on the ICSW Situation Report: Navigating Contemporary Dilemmas in Social Policy and Social Welfare. We will share the final program for SWSD2026 as soon as it is published. I encourage you all to register and participate in a future that will only be sustainable if we build it together.

In this issue of the Newsletter, in addition to the President's Corner, we feature an article by Marta Lora Tamayo, professor of Administrative Law, on "Urban planning, AI and Citizen Participation," and a contribution by Gloria Kirwan, ICSW special representative at UN Geneva, about the Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health Laureate 2026. I sincerely thank them for their commitment to the ICSW, and for allowing us, through these articles, to delve deeper into strategies for addressing new challenges and attend events that recognize achievements that promote social well-being and health.

To all of you who are involved in teaching and research, I wish you a successful end to the semester, and I hope to see you in Nairobi. And, for all of you working in public administration, international organizations, NGOs, or social services, I encourage you to set aside a few days and participate as much as possible in the World Congress in Nairobi, Kenya, June 26–29, 2026. I hope we can meet there and work together to improve the ICSW, and above all, share best practices to address the challenges of social welfare in the age of AI.

Take care and stay healthy.

Antonio

ICSW Executive Director

President´s Corner

Speaking the Language of Well-Being: Why It Matters

by Sergei Zelenev, ICSW President

The work of the International Council on Social Welfare has always been closely connected to the idea of social welfare and human well-being. Today, the language of well-being is becoming one of the most important ways to discuss social progress, as well as social justice and public policy. Yet the meaning of well-being is not always simple or clear. People have debated this question for centuries.

What does it really mean to live well? Is well-being about happiness? Is it about income and material comfort? Is it about freedom, dignity, good health, strong communities, or a sense of purpose? Different thinkers and cultures have answered these questions in different ways. But despite these differences, I believe that all of us, in one way or another, speak the language of well-being.

Even if we do not use scientific definitions, we still understand many basic elements of this language through our own experience. We ask ourselves simple but important questions. Am I satisfied with my life? Do I feel secure? Am I respected? Do I feel lonely or connected to others? Does my life have meaning? These are deeply human questions. They concern every person regardless of nationality, culture, age, or social position.

This is why the growing interest in subjective well-being is so important. Subjective well-being focuses on how people perceive and experience their own lives. It reminds us that statistics alone cannot fully describe the human condition. Economic growth, employment rates, and income levels matter greatly, but they do not tell the whole story. We also need to understand how people actually feel about their lives.

Researchers usually describe subjective well-being through three main dimensions[1]. The first is life evaluation. This refers to how people assess their lives overall. Are they satisfied with the direction of their lives? Do they feel their lives are going reasonably well?

The second dimension is affect. This concerns daily emotions and feelings. It includes positive emotions such as joy, calmness, or hope, but also negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, sadness, or anger. These feelings shape everyday life in powerful ways.

The third dimension is eudaimonia, a word that comes from ancient philosophy and means something like “good spirit” or human flourishing. For me, this may be the most interesting dimension because it relates to meaning and purpose. It asks whether people feel that their lives have value and direction.

Each of these dimensions tells us something important. Together, they help us understand people’s lived experiences more fully. They also complement objective social and economic indicators such as income, education, employment, housing, or physical health.

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1 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being-2025-update_9203632a-en.html

This balance between objective and subjective conditions is very important. A country may become richer economically while many people still feel insecure, lonely, or socially disconnected. On the other hand, some communities with modest material resources may still have strong social ties, solidarity, and resilience. This does not mean that poverty or inequality are unimportant. They remain very serious problems. But subjective well-being allows us to see dimensions of life that traditional statistics sometimes overlook.

I still remember a remarkable testimony about the paradoxes of development seen through the eyes of poor people themselves. I am referring to the World Bank's three-volume publication *Voices of the Poor*. In this study, more than 40,000 poor people from 50 countries were given an opportunity, through extensive interviews and questionnaires, to describe their daily realities in their own words. Their testimonies illustrated vividly that poverty is not merely a lack of income, but a condition shaped by many interconnected dimensions, including psychological insecurity and social exclusion, as well as vulnerability, and the gradual erosion of family and community ties.

What impressed me most was the way the study revealed the human side of poverty. It showed how households were crumbling under the stress of economic hardship and how the social fabric itself was beginning to unravel. The publication remains exceptional because it combined rigorous social science research with real human voices and lived experiences. In my view, the study remains unsurpassed both in the richness of its evidence and in its deeply values-based approach to development analysis.

For me, *Voices of the Poor* demonstrated why subjective well-being matters so much. It reminded us that people are not simply statistics in economic reports. They are human beings with fears and aspirations. Development cannot be measured only through national income or economic growth. We must also ask how people experience their daily lives and whether they feel secure, respected, and able to live with dignity.

Over the past decade, subjective well-being has gained growing recognition around the world. Nearly 90 percent of countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development now collect data on life satisfaction. I see this as an important development because it shows that governments and international organizations increasingly recognize that economic growth alone is not enough to measure progress.

At the same time, many challenges remain. Different countries measure well-being in different ways. This is especially true when it comes to meaning and purpose. These aspects of life are more difficult to measure than income or employment. Cultural differences also matter because people in different societies express satisfaction or dissatisfaction differently. Still, the growing effort to improve these methods is very valuable.

One reason subjective well-being matters is because it can help policymakers better understand social reality. In some cases, changes in well-being may appear before changes in economic statistics. Rising insecurity, loneliness, or declining trust may become visible long before they appear in official economic data. In this sense, subjective well-being can serve as an early warning signal.

For this reason, I believe public policy should pay greater attention to people's lived experiences. Policies should not be judged only by economic efficiency or technical success. We should also ask whether people feel safer, more included, and more hopeful about their future.

Strengthening the role of subjective well-being in policymaking represents an important step toward more human-centered governance. Better international standards and more reliable data are certainly important. But even more important is the broader change in thinking behind this approach. It means placing people, rather than abstract statistics alone, at the center of how we define progress.

For me, this discussion naturally leads to another important question: what is the relationship between individual well-being and social well-being? Is there really such a thing as “social well-being,” or is society simply the sum of individual experiences?

I think this is one of the most important philosophical and social questions of our time. Some people believe that society is mainly the result of individual choices and actions. According to this view, if individuals are doing well, society as a whole will also do well.

Others argue that society has its own structures, values, and institutions that shape individuals very deeply. Social cohesion and public institutions influence not only material conditions but also how people see themselves and their future.

Personally, I believe that individual and social well-being are closely connected. Human beings do not live in isolation. Our sense of meaning is influenced by families and communities, by workplaces and institutions, and the overall social climate around us.

A person may have financial success and still feel lonely or insecure in a divided and fragmented society. At the same time, strong communities and supportive social relationships can help people remain resilient even during difficult economic periods.

This is why I believe social policy must go beyond narrow economic calculations. It must also strengthen trust, inclusion, participation, solidarity, and social cohesion. A society marked by deep inequality, exclusion, fear, or insecurity cannot achieve lasting well-being.

I therefore hope that the ICSW Global Situation Report currently being prepared for the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development (SWSD) 2026 in Nairobi will become an important and influential document that attracts serious attention from participants and the wider public. Because it is grounded in regional submissions from across the ICSW network, it reflects diverse experiences and perspectives from different parts of the world. In this sense, it follows the same important principle: listening carefully to lived experience and giving voice to realities that are often overlooked in global debates.

For organizations such as ICSW, these questions are especially important. Revisiting them is not simply an academic exercise. It helps us think more clearly about the future of social development in a rapidly changing world.

Ultimately, speaking the language of well-being means recognizing that development is about people and human lives, not only about systems, institutions, or economic indicators. It means understanding that material progress matters greatly, but that human dignity, purpose, belonging, and social connection matter as well.

I believe that if we truly listen to people’s lived experiences and place well-being at the center of policy and social action, we can move closer to building societies that are not only wealthier, but also more compassionate and inclusive.

Urban planning, AI and Citizen Participation

by Marta Lora-Tamayo Vallvé

Urban planning is a key component of social policy and plays a very important role in social well-being. How is urban governance changing? Urban governance is currently undergoing a double transformation. On the one hand, traditional regulatory and zoning-based planning systems are increasingly complemented—and in some respects displaced—by strategic, non-binding and process-oriented instruments, commonly referred to as "agendas". On the other hand, public decision-making is being reshaped by digitalisation, big data and artificial intelligence, giving rise to new forms of evidence-based, platform-mediated and algorithmically supported governance. These two developments are not independent. Together, they are redefining how public authorities plan, govern and legitimise interventions in the territory, and how citizens participate in the construction of urban futures.

The emergence of the New Urban Agenda (2016), the Urban Agenda for the European Union, the Territorial Agenda 2030 and, at national level, the Spanish Urban Agenda, illustrates a broader transformation in the legal and institutional architecture of spatial governance. These instruments do not merely set policy goals; they institutionalise participation as a core organising principle of urban governance, linking the right to the city, sustainable development and multilevel coordination with deliberative, inclusive and knowledge-based decision-making processes.

At the same time, cities are becoming laboratories of algorithmic governance. Smart city platforms, digital twins, predictive analytics and AI-based decision-support systems increasingly inform urban planning, mobility management, environmental regulation and public service provision. While these technologies promise efficiency, precision and anticipatory capacity, they also risk reintroducing technocratic logics under the guise of objectivity, potentially weakening transparency, accountability and meaningful citizen participation.

The concept of agendisation refers to the progressive replacement—or, more accurately, the strategic reconfiguration—of traditional, hierarchical and norm-centred planning instruments by soft-law frameworks that articulate shared objectives, policy priorities and implementation pathways across multiple levels of government. Rather than operating through binding zoning rules or detailed regulatory commands, agendas function as strategic, integrative and process-oriented instruments. They establish a common language, a set of guiding principles and a methodology for coordinated action, while leaving room for contextual adaptation and institutional learning.

The agenda-based turn in urban governance provides a normative and institutional bridge between classical planning law and emerging forms of AI-assisted decision-making. By embedding participation, multilevel coordination and strategic vision into soft-law frameworks, territorial agendisation anticipates key safeguards required for democratic governance in the digital era. It offers a model in which artificial intelligence can support, rather than replace, collective deliberation, and where data-driven tools are subordinated to human-centred, rights-based and participatory principles.

Agendisation has progressively reconfigured the legal and institutional architecture of spatial governance. Through soft-law instruments such as the New Urban Agenda, the European Urban and Territorial Agendas and the Spanish Urban Agenda, participation has moved from a peripheral procedural guarantee to a structural principle of policy design, implementation and evaluation. These agendas have institutionalised a model of governance based on strategic vision, multilevel coordination, evidence-based reasoning and, above all, co-production with citizens and stakeholders. In doing so, they have anticipated many of the normative and procedural requirements that are now emerging as essential in the context of algorithmic governance.

Artificial intelligence and digital platforms amplify both the possibilities and the risks inherent in this transformation. On the one hand, they enable unprecedented capacities for territorial diagnosis, scenario modelling, impact assessment and real-time monitoring, potentially strengthening collective intelligence and the quality of public decision-making. On the other hand, they introduce new forms of opacity, concentration of epistemic power and technocratic displacement that may undermine democratic deliberation and accountability if left unchecked.

The core argument advanced here is that agenda-based, participatory and multilevel governance provides a crucial institutional and legal scaffold for ensuring that AI becomes an instrument of democratic empowerment rather than a vector of depoliticisation. By embedding participation across the entire policy cycle, articulating evidence with deliberation, and linking local knowledge with strategic coordination at higher levels, territorial agendisation offers a model of human-centred algorithmic governance. In this model, artificial intelligence supports, but does not replace, political judgment, legal responsibility and civic deliberation.

From a legal perspective, this entails a re-interpretation of classical principles of administrative and planning law—transparency, due process, reason-giving, accountability and judicial review—in light of algorithmic mediation. Participation must be guaranteed not only at the level of final decisions, but also in the construction of data infrastructures, indicators and predictive models. The right to the city, re-conceptualised through the New Urban Agenda and its European and national derivatives, thus acquires a new dimension: the right to participate in the governance of socio-technical systems that shape urban life.

Ultimately, territorial agendisation can be understood as a form of democratic constitutionalism of urban governance in the making. Through soft law, strategic planning and participatory architectures, it establishes the normative conditions under which the transition towards AI-assisted cities can remain anchored in fundamental rights, social inclusion and collective self-government. The challenge for the coming years will be to consolidate this framework, ensuring that the digital transformation of public administration and urban planning strengthens, rather than erodes, the democratic foundations of spatial decision-making.

In this sense, the convergence of agendas, participation and artificial intelligence does not signal the end of planning law or public deliberation. On the contrary, it calls for their renewal: a move towards a multilevel, participatory and technologically informed model of governance in which cities are not merely managed by algorithms, but collectively governed by informed, empowered and legally protected urban citizens.

Marta Lora-Tamayo Vallvé. Professor of Administrative Law, UNED. Department of Administrative Law. Director of the UNED-Lincoln Institute Chair on Land Policy

Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health Laureate 2026 awarded to Professor Mohammad Abul Faiz from Bangladesh

by Gloria Kirwan

Gloria Kirwan, ICSW UN-Geneva representative, attended the annual award of the Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health which took place on 22 May 2026 in the Campus Biotech in Geneva as part of the wider World Health Assembly. The award was presented this year to Professor Mohammad Abul Faiz from Bangladesh for his substantial and long-term contribution to combatting neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) and infectious diseases, particularly conditions related to snakebite and malaria.

Dr LEE was elected as the 6th Director-General of the World Health Organization and the first Korean to hold that role. He championed the vision of 'Health for All' and supported many initiatives including strengthening infectious disease preparedness and the expansion of access to essential medicines to name just a few. Supporting his legacy, the Korean Foundation for International Healthcare (KOFIH) works to advance global health through international collaboration and sustainable development. KOFIH has been instrumental in organising this Memorial Prize for many years.

At the event, Professor Faiz delivered his Laureate's address in the session titled 'From Talk to Action: One Health in the Real World'. A keynote address was also delivered by Jiho CHA titled 'From Past to Future: Public Intelligence in Future Health System'. Other sessions included contributions from experts in a range of fields and the sessions included titles such as 'Global Health Leadership and Commitment' and 'Shaping the Future: Strategic Directions for Sustainable Global Health Leadership and the role of youth' as well as a session commemorating Dr LEE's substantial contribution to global health titled 'Dr LEE Jong-wook's Legacy and the Future of Global Health Leadership'.

Gloria Kirwan, pictured here with event attendee Krista Wasowski (L), MSW, MPH, who is the Health Commissioner for Medina County, Ohio, USA.

Publications in Focus

What Would it Cost to End Extreme Poverty?

by Sergei Zelenev

WHAT WOULD IT COST TO END EXTREME POVERTY? Roshni Sahoo, Joshua Blumenstock, Paul Niehaus, Leo Selker, and Stefan Wager. Working Paper 34583 http://www.nber.org/papers/w34583 NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH 1050 Massachusetts Avenue Cambridge, MA 02138 December 2025

The working paper by Roshni Sahoo and her co-authors represents a significant conceptual and methodological advance in the design of anti-poverty policies. Rather than focusing on the traditional objective of identifying who is poor relative to a fixed poverty line, the authors shift attention to the *poverty gap*—that is, the depth of poverty—and propose a data-driven framework that uses machine learning to determine not only who should receive transfers, but *how much* each household should receive. This reframing has important implications for both the efficiency and equity of redistribution policies.

At the heart of the paper lies a simple but powerful observation. While global extreme poverty has declined dramatically—from over 40 percent of the world's population in the early 1980s to under 10 percent today—hundreds of millions still live below minimal consumption thresholds. Moreover, the pace of poverty reduction may slow as global economic growth weakens. In this context, the authors ask whether redistribution—if implemented intelligently—could accelerate the elimination of extreme poverty at a manageable fiscal cost. Their answer is cautiously optimistic, but conditional on improving how transfers are targeted.

Traditional approaches to targeting, such as Proxy Means Tests (PMTs), attempt to classify households as eligible or ineligible based on observable characteristics correlated with income or consumption. These methods are constrained by limited data and administrative feasibility, and they typically result in binary outcomes: households either receive a fixed transfer or nothing. The innovation in this paper is to treat the design of transfer policies as a *statistical learning problem*. Instead of predicting poverty status, the policymaker learns a function that maps observable household characteristics to a continuous transfer amount, with the explicit objective of minimizing poverty.

Crucially, the authors argue that the choice of objective function matters. Minimizing the poverty *rate* —the share of people below the poverty line—can lead to perverse outcomes, as it incentivizes directing resources to those just below the threshold, neglecting the poorest. By contrast, minimizing the *poverty gap* ensures that poorer households receive larger transfers, embedding a notion of equity directly into the optimization problem. This is not merely a normative claim; the authors show that gap-minimizing policies also perform well in reducing the poverty rate and, in some cases, outperform rate-minimizing approaches due to their more tractable statistical properties.

The use of machine learning is central to operationalizing this framework. Because policymakers lack direct consumption data for most households, the algorithm must infer living standards from proxies —such as housing characteristics or asset ownership—similar to those used in existing PMT systems. However, rather than estimating a single prediction of consumption, the method learns conditional quantiles of the consumption distribution, which are sufficient for determining optimal transfers under gap minimization. This allows the use of flexible, high-dimensional models, including neural networks, to capture complex relationships between observable characteristics and welfare.

Empirically, the paper provides a comprehensive assessment based on data from 23 countries that together account for about half of the world's extreme poor. The results are striking. The authors estimate that reducing the global extreme poverty rate to 1 percent using gap-minimizing targeted transfers would cost on the order of $300 billion annually—less than half a percent of global GDP. While this is substantially higher than the theoretical minimum implied by the global poverty gap (which assumes perfect information), it is far lower than the cost of untargeted approaches such as universal basic income. In this sense, the paper quantifies the "price of imperfect information" while demonstrating that even second-best policies can be highly effective.

At the same time, the analysis reveals important trade-offs. Simpler policies—such as those that assign a uniform transfer to all eligible households—are significantly less efficient, increasing costs by over 40 percent relative to fully optimized policies. This highlights a tension between administrative simplicity and economic efficiency. Moreover, the reliance on proxy variables raises concerns about transparency, political acceptability, and potential exclusion errors. While the authors deliberately exclude sensitive variables such as ethnicity, the use of complex algorithms may still face resistance in real-world policy environments.

Another limitation lies in the paper's abstraction from behavioral and macroeconomic responses. The framework assumes that transfers translate directly into higher consumption, ignoring potential effects on labor supply, prices, or local economic conditions. Yet, as the authors acknowledge, large-scale cash transfers could have significant general equilibrium effects, including inflationary pressures or exchange rate appreciation. These factors could alter both the cost and effectiveness of the proposed policies.

Despite these caveats, the paper makes a compelling contribution by bridging the gap between theoretical optimal policy design and practical implementation under real-world constraints. It revives and modernizes an older tradition of thinking about poverty alleviation—one that starts from a desired outcome (ending extreme poverty) and works backward to determine the required resources—while grounding the analysis in contemporary data and computational methods.

Perhaps the most important insight is conceptual. By focusing on the poverty gap and leveraging machine learning to individualize transfers, the authors move beyond the binary logic of inclusion and exclusion that has long dominated social policy. In doing so, they offer a vision of redistribution that is both more precise and more humane: one that recognizes that poverty is not a threshold condition, but a continuum, and that effective policy must respond accordingly.

In conclusion, the work by Sahoo and her co-authors demonstrates that the elimination of extreme poverty is not only a moral imperative but also a technically tractable goal—provided that policymakers are willing to embrace more sophisticated tools and rethink conventional approaches to targeting. While significant challenges remain in translating these ideas into practice, the paper sets a new benchmark for what is analytically possible and opens a promising avenue for future research and policy innovation.

More Activity at ICSW- Save the Date!

SWSD 2026 conference in Kenya
26-29 June, 2026

https://swsd2026.or.ke/

TO ICSW Europe Members!

Open call for nominations for the upcoming two-year-period (2027-2028)

In the European Region this year we have to elect the Regional President, Regional Vice-President, Regional Vice-President, Regional Treasurer and the members of the Regional Board.

The election process of ICSW Europe starts on 30 March 2026.

Important dates:
-The deadline for sending the nominations - until **31 May 2026**;
-In case of insufficient nominations, we have a possibility to manage a specific regional process;
-Voting will be in an electronic way in September - October 2026;
-The results of the electronic voting will be announced and approved at the General Assembly in Vienna on **13 November 2026**.

For the documents required to be completed, please, contact the Secretariat of ICSW Europe: gabriela.siantova@ icsw.org

https://www.icsw.org

Contributions to the newsletter are welcome!

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