**Concept note for the Side-Event:**

**Fostering Inclusive Communities: Addressing Barriers to Social Participation**
*Co-sponsored by ICSW and IASSW*

This side-event at the **63rd session of the Commission for Social Development** will explore how inclusive participation can serve as a cornerstone of vibrant, equitable, and cohesive communities. Inclusive participation is needed more than ever to counter the rise of exclusionary rhetoric that can contribute to divisions within communities. Participation is not merely a means to achieve social goals but an end in itself—enabling individuals to contribute to decisions that directly affect their lives while fostering a sense of belonging, empowerment, and mutual trust. Through participatory processes, communities can develop more accurate diagnoses of social needs, co-design welfare systems, and evaluate their impact. This ensures that welfare policies are responsive, equitable, and transparent, while also enhancing accountability and reducing corruption. Participation is a form of enabling social welfare that enhances both community and individual well-being. By involving diverse voices, it strengthens social cohesion, empowers citizens, and builds trust in public institutions. The co-design of welfare systems by citizens, civil society organizations, and private sector actors ensures that these systems are responsive to growing concerns such as the cost-of-living crisis, healthcare, and education. Participation reaffirms that social welfare is a central pillar of sustainable development, rather than a residual concern.

The side-event event will highlight:

1. **The transformative potential of participation** as a tool for achieving social welfare and inclusion.
2. **The role of local administrations** in fostering participatory processes that reflect community priorities and ensure equitable access.
3. **Strategies for addressing barriers to participation**, particularly for vulnerable groups, through inclusive design, accountability mechanisms, and digital innovation.

The speakers are expected to cover the following key themes:

**1. Removing Barriers to Inclusion**

Inclusive participation requires addressing structural, economic, and technological barriers. Special attention will be given to ensuring accessibility, affordability, and quality of participatory channels for marginalized populations, including older persons, persons with disabilities, and minority groups.

**2. Digitalization and Participation**

The digital age offers new opportunities for participatory governance. Local governments can leverage technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and immersive platforms to engage citizens in urban planning, service delivery, and policy evaluation. However, ensuring digital inclusion is essential to avoid marginalization and to provide equitable access to information and services.

**3. Intergenerational Solidarity**

Participation bridges generational divides, fostering dialogue and cooperation between older and younger cohorts. This solidarity contributes to community cohesion and enables a shared vision for sustainable development.

**Expected Outcomes:**

The side-event will:

* Share best practices and innovations in fostering inclusive participation.
* Explore actionable recommendations for removing barriers to participation.
* Highlight the role of local administrations and digital tools in empowering communities.
* Promote collaboration across sectors to co-design responsive and sustainable welfare systems.

By emphasizing inclusive participation as both a means and an end, the event aims to advance discussions on creating more equitable, resilient, and inclusive communities. This aligns with the broader goals of the Commission for Social Development to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of social progress.

**Speakers:**

Prof. Lynne Healy, Main Representative of IASSW to the United Nations

Prof. P.K. Shajahan, TATA Institute of Social Sciences, India

Prof. Antonio Lopez Pelaez, UNED, Spain

Dr. Sergei Zelenev, Special Representative of ICSW to the UN

**Moderator:** Prof. Gloria Kirwan, Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland