Citizen Participation



Development and Peace
CARITAS CANADA

"It is not just the people's vote, but rather it requires creating conditions that allow everyone to express themselves and participate. Participation cannot be improvised: it is learned from childhood, and young people must be 'trained' even to develop a critical sense regarding ideological and populist temptations."

— Pope Francis

Almost every country in the world holds elections periodically to choose its leaders. However, democracy is not merely about the right to vote; it depends on everyone's ability to participate continuously in public life. By fostering civic engagement in everyday life, an organized civil society serves as an essential pillar of democracy. That is why Development and Peace — Caritas Canada supports organized groups that address the root causes of poverty and influence the decisions that affect them.

Factors undermining citizen participation around the world

Democracy is never a given; it must always be built and preserved. Around the world, several factors are undermining citizen participation and democratic institutions:

- **The rise of authoritarianism, populism and militarization** undermines democratic institutions, threatens rights and freedoms and calls democratic gains into question.
- **The erosion of the rule of law and the rise of authoritarian tendencies** allow certain leaders to consolidate their power and restrict freedoms under the guise of stability and nationalism.
- **Socioeconomic crises and poverty** can erode public trust in democratic institutions and foster support for leaders who promise radical change or authoritarian solutions.
- **Corruption and impunity** make democracies vulnerable and can enable authoritarian leaders to consolidate their power by limiting traditional checks and balances.
- **Disinformation and online manipulation campaigns** can influence public opinion, sow confusion and undermine trust in democratic processes, while digital technologies and artificial intelligence are transforming the political landscape.
- **The polarization of political discourse** can make compromise difficult if not impossible, hinder effective governance and contribute to the escalation of conflicts.
- **Extremism** can fuel division by demonizing opponents or marginalized groups and pitting people against one another along "with us, or against us" lines, to the detriment of tolerance and pluralism.

And what about women in all of this?



Women's voices remain largely underrepresented. Globally, women lead just **1 in 7 countries**; hold under a quarter of cabinet posts; and occupy only **27.5 per cent** of parliamentary seats.

Levels and forms of democracy

Democracy is exercised both within formal political institutions and at the everyday grassroots level. These two levels of operation complement and reinforce each other. An **organized civil society bridges the gap between them and promotes inclusive governance** by strengthening citizen participation in collective decision-making and the exercise of power. The forms of democracy include:

- **Institutional democracy**, which is based on elections, institutions and official mechanisms at the local, regional and national levels
- **Inclusive democracy and citizen participation**, which enable civil society to influence public decisions through advocacy, referendums, consultations and collaborative processes
- **Grassroots democracy**, which takes place within civil society, where communities organize themselves, participate in collective decision-making and establish democratic governance structures

In promoting citizen participation, our programming focusses particularly on:



RURAL COMMUNITIES, PEASANT MOVEMENTS AND SMALL-SCALE FARMING FAMILIES



URBAN POPULATIONS IN METROPOLITAN AREAS, CITIES AND SUBURBS



WOMEN'S AND YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS



INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AT THE LOCAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS



MINORITY AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS

The pursuit of social change

Democracy is worth pursuing because it is known to increase gender equality, social cohesion and social protections; reduce corruption; improve public services; promote peace; and stimulate economies.

For Development and Peace — Caritas Canada, democracy is inseparable from justice, equity, respect for human rights and the dignity of all people. We seek to transform the power dynamics that create and perpetuate inequality and exclusion by supporting communities that bring democracy to life every day.

Our programs aim to:



Promote social cohesion, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution, particularly among the youth and vulnerable populations.



Defend the rights of rural and Indigenous communities—including rights to land and to the protection of natural resources—and train leaders committed to social and ecological justice.



Promote the social and economic inclusion of migrants and strengthen their ties with host communities.



Strengthen civil society organizations that raise awareness, mobilize people and defend human rights.



Create spaces for dialogue and participation between communities and authorities to ensure that citizens' demands are heard.



Strengthen the participation and leadership of women, youths and marginalized people in democratic processes and community life.