

Concept Note

25th Conference of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (OIDP) in Kraków 2026

- Kraków (Poland), 21-23 September 2026 -

*Hope and Renewal in The Face of a Global Crisis of Democracy.
The Future of Participatory Democracy from Local to International Governance.*

The 25th Conference of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (OIDP) is organized by the Municipality of Kraków (Poland) and the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). It will bring together political leaders, officials, academics, and activists who will reflect and discuss the challenges facing the future of participatory democracy from local, national, and international perspectives.

Keynote of the OIDP Conference Kraków 2026

The 25th anniversary edition of the OIDP Conference will focus on observing and analysing participatory democracy. Twenty four conferences have allowed us to gain valuable knowledge about participatory democracy. This time, during the 25th OIDP Conference we aim to look towards the future and reflect in greater depth on the role of participatory democracy in the changing world. Current global crises such as wars, migration, climate change, and radical social polarization are resulting in declining trust in democracy. Moreover, as technology such as artificial intelligence continue to advance, they introduce new risks, including misinformation and fabricated narratives. Addressing the challenges mentioned above calls for a firm and active commitment to participatory democracy. We believe that the future of democracy itself depends on participatory democracy. True participatory democracy, which addresses society's everyday problems, is rooted at the local level. As it evolves, it increasingly extends its reach beyond local boundaries. Overall, reflecting on the future of participatory democracy must therefore connect the local, national and international dimensions of participation.

Thematic Pathways of the OIDP Conference Kraków 2026

The conference will focus on four main thematic pathways:

I. Citizen Participation in Times of Crisis – Building Trust, Inclusion, and Civic Engagement

This pathway explores how citizen participation can and should prevent current global crises, both nationally and internationally. At its core, this topic explores how participatory processes can shape strategies for crisis mitigation and adaptation, while emphasizing the role of inclusive civic engagement in fostering public trust and a shared sense of responsibility. Engaging in public decision-making is crucial, because it gives citizens a sense of empowerment and makes them feel that they have a genuine impact on their surroundings. This strengthens democratic mechanisms and builds stronger social bonds, especially in challenging circumstances. In this category, we particularly welcome interdisciplinary discussions on participatory processes that enhance public communication, with a special focus on those that ensure social discourse remains accessible to diverse social groups, including individuals marginalized on the basis of age, race or other factors. Moreover, this pathway also explores new approaches to participatory processes. It discusses the role of behavioural interventions and non-formal civic education in promoting meaningful participation and enhancing communication between citizens and the state. It also highlights practices based on art and creativity, including policy design games, and legislative theatre, as a way to engage different stakeholders, bring together polarized groups, build trust, and generate innovative solutions. Theoretical and practical presentations showing how inclusive civic engagement can strengthen democratic values and build public trust are welcome.

II. Deeper Democracy - The Impact of Institutionalizing Deliberation on Representative Democracy

This pathway considers the growing role of new deliberative methods as innovative tools for strengthening democracy, driven by the need for more effective approaches to dialogue and decision-making. As these methods gain recognition globally, this thematic pathway examines how both international organizations, such as the European Union,

and local municipalities can effectively implement public deliberation, as well as the limitations that may emerge in the process. The focus is on how democratic innovations (for instance, citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, or deliberative polls) are evolving or could evolve from one-off methods to integral elements of democratic governance, at various political levels – local, national, and transnational. Sessions will showcase best practices and methodological insights, alongside theoretical discussions on institutionalizing deliberation tools in the framework of representative democracy. Experiences from around the world that highlight the importance of transforming temporary democratic experiments into lasting structures of representative democracy are welcome.

III. Citizen Participation in the Context of Transformation and Building Democratic Structures

Why is democratic participation more challenging for some groups than for others? This pathway investigates the complex realities of participatory democracy in societies undergoing social, political, legal, and technological transformation from around the world, including Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania, Europe, and North and South America. Firstly, it explores how historical heritage and ideological transitions have influenced civic engagement, often creating barriers but also opportunities for democratic renewal. Secondly, it considers how participation is used in political and legal transformations, including in the context of important social issues or constitutional debates particularly in countries with developing democracies or limited electoral systems. Emphasis will be placed on experiences demonstrating the impact of grassroots civic engagement in the context of democratic transitions (for example, in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa). Thirdly, this pathway deals with participation methods and tools that leverage new technologies. The discussion will present the potential of new technologies, such as AI, to improve participatory activities and focus on how to implement them wisely but also consider threats such as digital exclusion. Practical and theoretical sessions and presentations are both welcome.

IV. Local governments in the spotlight of citizen participation

Citizen participation mostly begins in cities. This pathway explores the central role of local governments in shaping and sustaining citizen participation, highlighting how municipalities, towns, and villages serve as laboratories for democratic innovation.

As the closest level of governance to everyday life, local authorities are uniquely positioned to foster inclusive, responsive, and community-driven decision-making. This pathway invites you to present examples of local participatory practices both institutional approaches led by local governments and bottom-up movements initiated by residents, for instance local mini-publics, participatory budgeting, neighbourhood consultations, and decentralized civic initiatives. A key theme in this pathway is also urban citizenship and how various groups frame the city as their exclusive domain and seek to assert privileged access to its spaces and resources. Today's cities, which are becoming increasingly diverse both demographically and socially, are more frequently serving as places of residence or centres of vital interests for individuals without formal resident status. This diversity creates challenges in building inclusive, integrated and cohesive urban communities. The question arises of how to effectively engage these groups, which, despite coexisting in urban spaces daily, do not always have formal civil rights. Therefore, this pathway aims to create a forum for discussing concepts of urban citizenship and to formulate specific recommendations to enhance the inclusion and engagement of informal residents in local decision-making and social processes.

Conference Methodology

The conference will be held on-site in Krakow on 21-23 September 2026.

The conference will be an interdisciplinary, inclusive and open space for all those interested in participatory democracy. Its format will allow participants to navigate comfortably between sessions to make the best use of them and align the thematic pathways with their interests.

An open call for active participation will be announced, and the Scientific Committee will oversee the selection process. We invite individual speakers and pre-arranged collective panels to apply. We expect both traditionally structured panel sessions with moderated discussions and innovative knowledge-sharing formats, as well as workshops and interactive sessions that leverage new technologies. Panels that actively engage participants and foster active audience involvement such as workshops, simulations, or world cafes, are welcome. We want to place significant emphasis on presenting good practices not only through theoretical discussions, but also by sharing practical experiences, particularly through simulations of effective participatory methods.

The leading languages of the conference are English, Polish, Spanish and French. Translation will be provided during the sessions.

Expected Outcomes

The 25th Conference of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy will conclude with the adoption of a Political Declaration, capturing the key messages and shared commitments emerging from the discussions. The event will also host the OIDP Award Ceremony for “Best Practice in Citizen Participation”, celebrating innovative and inspiring participatory experiences from around the world.

A conference report summarizing the debates, conclusions, and recommendations will be published after the event to support ongoing advocacy and knowledge exchange.

Beyond its official outcomes, the conference aims to strengthen alliances and partnerships among local governments, academia, civil society, and international organizations, while fostering tangible collaborative initiatives that advance participatory democracy globally.