Call for Papers for Workshop on Democratizing Human Rights: Towards an Inclusive and Participatory Human Rights Agenda

A Project of the Participedia Human Rights Cluster
Date: July 2025 | **Venue:** Hamilton, Canada | **Format:** In-Person & Virtual

Background

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, set forth fundamental rights and freedoms to which all individuals are entitled. However, the implementation and protection of these rights have often been uneven, as international human rights laws are frequently shaped by geopolitical dynamics and interests, questions of national sovereignty, and assertions of cultural particularities. Over 75 years later, the universality of human rights remains both a foundational ideal and a source of ongoing tension, as the practical application of these rights often reflects imbalances in power and privilege.

The challenges of universal human rights lie in the gap between theoretical principles and the diverse realities of global populations. International human rights frameworks are frequently shaped by a top-down approach, with little room for local voices—particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable communities—to influence how rights are defined and upheld. This imbalance has prompted calls for the democratization of human rights: a process that invites broader participation in the interpretation and implementation of human rights, allowing for the voices of ordinary people to play a more central role in shaping the global rights agenda. The democratization of human rights also seeks to transform local and international institutional practices to have the capacity to apply rights equitably.

Two key elements of this democratization process are democratic innovations—comprising new forms of participatory governance—and deliberative democracy—centered on reasoned discussion and collective decision-making Both have emerged as critical frameworks for revitalizing democracy. These approaches offer pathways to deepen citizen engagement, enhance the quality of decision-making, and overcome some of the limitations inherent in traditional democratic models.

Yet, democratic practices alone are inadequate to ensure the protection of marginalized or vulnerable populations. To foster truly just and equitable societies, democracy must be mediated by human rights principles, ensuring that political systems not only reflect the will of the majority but also protect the rights of all individuals, particularly those who might otherwise be marginalized or silenced. The relationship between democracy and human rights is thus fundamentally symbiotic. Democracy reinforces the inclusive and universalist ethos of human rights, while human rights principles serve as a critical check against the potential "tyranny" of majoritarian rule.

We invite scholars, policymakers and practitioners in the fields of human rights, democracy and related disciplines to submit paper proposals for a workshop on democratizing human rights. This workshop will explore how participatory processes can address the tensions between majority rule and minority rights, and between the universality of human rights and the particularities of local contexts. Proposals should draw connections between democracy and human rights. We are also interested in proposals to examine how democratic innovation and mechanisms of deliberative democracy can help actualize the core principles of human rights—such as dignity, equality, and justice—by making them responsive to the needs and voices of all people, especially those who have historically been marginalized, both within states and transnationally. We welcome proposals that explore, but are not limited to, the following themes, and consider diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives:

1. Democracy and the Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights
2. Universal Human Rights and Democracy in the International Political Order
3. The Sociopolitical Implications of Deliberative Democracy for Human Rights
4. Democratic Innovations, Deliberative Technologies and Human Rights
5. Majority Rule, Minority Rights and Democracy in the Information Age
6. Human Rights, Democracy, and Environmental Sustainability

Interested participants should send a proposal, including the title of their paper, a 300-word abstract, and a 100-word biography, to
participediahumanrightscluster@gmail.com

Proposals are due on **January 15, 2025.**
Selected papers will be announced in **February 2025.**
The workshop is scheduled for **July 2025.**

Format and Funding

The workshop will be held in-person, with a selection of sessions conducted in hybrid format. We are in the process of securing sponsorships and cannot currently guarantee that funding will be available. Where possible, Global South and Early Career Scholars will be prioritized for funding opportunities.

Conveners
Dr. Bonny Ibhawoh - Professor, Centre for Human Rights and Restorative Justice, McMaster University (Co-Chair, Participedia Human Rights Cluster)

Dr. Melissa Levin - Assistant Professor, African Studies Program, University of Toronto (Co-Chair, Participedia Human Rights Cluster)

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