Research for Social Change

Ideas to Impacts


UNRISD
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNRISD is the only institution in the United Nations system with a mandate dedicated exclusively to research and policy analysis on social development.

We generate evidence, frame debates, and support policies and practices towards the attainment of core United Nations values of equity, justice and rights for all. We focus our attention on pressing development challenges: ending poverty, reducing inequality, promoting gender equity, realizing human rights and attaining social justice within ecological limits.

To do this we use our global convening power as a long-standing UN organization with a reputation for excellence to leverage an international network of academics, policy makers and practitioners, coordinated by a small core staff. We contribute to ensuring that the development community draws on the best possible knowledge base and respects a plurality of ideas.

Our location in Geneva offers exceptional possibilities for collaboration and influence, given the city’s unparalleled concentration of relevant UN agencies, member state delegations and global NGOs. UNRISD contributes to the efforts of International Geneva to promote peace, rights and well-being in developed and developing countries.

What makes us distinctive

We generate knowledge on the often neglected social consequences of development policies and pathways, and on the processes of social change.

Our extensive networks of researchers, policy makers and civil society actors from the global North and South are recognized as one of our greatest assets. The result is evidence-based, policy-relevant research emerging from co-production of knowledge, and readily accessible pathways to policy impact.

We work in an autonomous space: within the United Nations, yet unusually free from political constraints thanks to our independent governance and funding structures.

From our position we exercise our global convening power to promote under-represented viewpoints, often challenging mainstream development thinking and offering alternative policy options.

What makes our impact possible

Long-term, stable funding allows us to conduct multi-country, multi-disciplinary, multi-year research; build effective networks; strengthen our own and our partners’ institutional capacity; and provide timely responses to immediate policy concerns.

A highly efficient model of resource deployment: a small Geneva-based staff and a global network of researchers, policy makers and practitioners produces significant multiplier effects and excellent value for money.
Ahead of the curve
UNRISD’s agenda-setting capacity

We have an impressive track record of anticipating future agendas, putting us and our stakeholders in a strong position to influence tomorrow’s policy choices. By analysing current development policies and practices, studying past experience and combining this knowledge with a capacity for creative thinking, we have been at the forefront of debate on many contemporary development issues.

But we don’t do this by ourselves. We encourage input in the form of ideas and resources throughout the research process. This is why we engage our stakeholders at the design stage of a research agenda, to identify mutual interests and concerns related to the often-neglected social consequences of development. Together with our partners, we provide the evidence and innovative analysis needed to get burning issues onto policy makers’ radar.

Care matters: Development through a gender lens

UNRISD research has led and continually challenged the field of gender and development, advancing academic inquiry and linking it with policy and practice. One example is our pioneering work on the social and political economy of care (both direct care of persons and domestic work). Our original analysis of time-use surveys and unpaid care work in the mid-2000s was among the first of its kind in developing countries, and has since stimulated new research activities and driven this innovative field of inquiry. Thanks to our research, disseminated through presentations and panel events at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2009, contributions to UN DESA publications, and leadership of an Expert Group that drafted the first report by the UN Secretary-General on the topic, the issue of care is now firmly positioned on the development agenda. Our research evidence and analysis is regularly cited when policy makers and activists argue that recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work has a major positive development impact. A target on unpaid care work has now been included in the final outcome document of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, reflecting growing awareness of its centrality to women’s empowerment, poverty reduction and development.

Poverty, inequality and post-2015

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) put poverty reduction firmly at the centre of the development agenda. But five years into the MDGs, UNRISD research was sounding alarm bells: despite progress in some areas, poverty levels were not falling as expected and the cautious nature of the MDGs as a social development agenda was becoming apparent. By 2010 in our Flagship Report, Combating Poverty and Inequality, we identified persistent and growing inequality as one of the main barriers to poverty reduction.

Since then, a global discourse on inequality has emerged, driven by events from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement, and reflected in the World Bank’s new goal of “shared prosperity”, defined as improving the income of the bottom 40% of the population. Our early and influential work on this topic has positioned UNRISD as a key player in UN processes that put inequality at the centre of the post-2015 agenda.

Our research evidence contributed to what then termed the “Emerging Issue of Inequality”. Equally, our contribution to the Global Thematic Consultation on the Post-2015 Development Agenda: Addressing Inequalities was recognized when the UNRISD Director co-presented the synthesis report to a Leadership Meeting of ministers, members of the High-Level Panel on Post-2015 and international development organizations, much enhancing our visibility.

Social dimensions of sustainability

UNRISD stands out as a place where economic, social, political and environmental angles of development challenges are analysed as interlinked issues, not in silos. In 2012, in the run-up to Rio+20 the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or UNCSD, the Institute provided a much-needed and valued space where the social consequences of responses to the environmental and climate crisis could be foregrounded.

UNRISD came into its own for its ability to bring together people from different countries and disciplines to identify alternative ways of understanding the social dimensions of green economy in the context of sustainable development. Using the evidence generated, we made a series of formal contributions to UN processes around Rio+20, including official UNCSD documentation, the UN Task Team on Social Dimensions of Climate Change and the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability.

Building on our forward-thinking role in this field, we are now well-placed to continue providing the cutting-edge knowledge base for an integrated approach to implementation of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

“Three years on, we are seeing much more discussion on inequality, for example in post-2015 consultations. I think the UNRISD Flagship Report and the way it was communicated were very useful.”

Response to the Stakeholder Survey in the 2014 DFID evaluation

“UNRISD’s work on the political and social economy of care was prior to work done by other UN agencies. It generated discussions and made the topic public.”

Response to the Stakeholder Survey in the 2014 DFID evaluation
Impact trajectories
UNRISD’s spheres of influence

We are uniquely located at the nexus of three spheres of influence: member states and the secretariat of the United Nations; civil society; and the academic community. UNRISD is thus strategically placed for its research to have a potentially three-fold impact trajectory. Together with our partners we help build progressive ideas from the bottom-up, shape mainstream policy approaches and reframe the scholarly debates that inform global processes.

Bringing sustainability from the grassroots to the UN

People in countries around the world are reacting to recent economic and financial crises, sometimes by developing more caring, socially aware alternatives to business-as-usual. Such alternatives cannot be ignored by the UN and other development actors endeavouring to create “the world we want”. At UNRISD we have played a pioneering role in raising awareness within the UN system of the emerging social and solidarity economy (SSE), highlighting its potential for more socially just pathways to development. Our initiatives in this direction have resulted in the creation of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, whose role is to mainstream SSE in international policy frameworks, act as a platform for cooperation between UN agencies, and facilitate the co-production of knowledge and exchange of experience. This example speaks volumes of our ability to take a grassroots idea and bring it to the international sphere.

National-level impact: Inspiring policy change

The development agendas that directly impact people’s lives are most often set at the national level. Time and again, UNRISD research can be seen informing policy change in countries around the world. The Korean development agency (KOICA) has worked extensively with us to gain insights into the social dimensions of its own development experience, and is using this knowledge to identify how, as a new donor, it can work with partners to improve the development effectiveness of its aid. Brazil’s Ministry of Planning has invited UNRISD to explore concrete ways to implement an integrated approach to development, linking economic growth, social protection and distributional outcomes within a human rights framework. And the African Union Commission’s Social Policy Framework for Africa draws its inspiration and rationale from UNRISD work on social policy in a development context, viewing social policy as a comprehensive and coherent agenda of collective public efforts to affect and protect people’s well-being. The Framework provides the ideas on which many African countries base their social development strategies, and the principles to which they aspire. Ethiopia’s strategy, with its comprehensive, universalist approach, draws directly on our work on transformative social policy.

Civil society impact: Robust evidence to support advocacy

Strong advocacy relies on a solid knowledge base, and many international and local civil society groups draw on our research evidence to advance their work. For example, NGOs have long been aware of the need to reduce women’s double burden of home/family duties and paid work, but have found it challenging to make it into a policy issue. Our pioneering role in the analysis of care and its impact on economic development has provided key arguments and evidence that inform the publications of organizations like Oxfam and ActionAid, and which are the basis for major action campaigns such as Making Care Visible and Innovations in Care. These projects are using knowledge generated by UNRISD to have a concrete impact on the ground, improving people’s awareness of unpaid care work in their communities, and providing practitioners with tools for action and policy influence.

Academic impact: Transforming scholarly debates

Ideas change with time. Over 50 years, UNRISD research has transformed development ideas—around social policy, gender, participation and sustainability, for example. Our pioneering work on social policy in a development context brought together two previously separate areas of study to radically change the terms of debate. The study of social policy had been largely limited to Northern welfare states, with a model that was widely regarded as unaffordable in low-income countries. A growing literature on the developmental state in emerging and developing countries provided an opportunity to understand the role of social policies in these contexts. By bringing together these bodies of literature, UNRISD research provided evidence that universal welfare provisions can be introduced at low levels of income, and can enhance economic growth as well as providing social protection and generating a more equitable distribution of wealth. This work has transformed the academic debate on social policy in developing countries, which in turn has informed global and regional policies such as the Global Social Protection Floor and the African Union Commission’s Social Policy Framework.
Making Connections
Networking and capacity building

When people work together, good things can come out of it. When people do research together, something special happens: ideas emerge, crystallize and multiply. We recognize the extraordinary power of human intellectual collaboration and leverage that power to the benefit of those who can achieve something with it: Southern researchers sharing knowledge with their peers and enhancing local scholarship; policy makers in developing countries who are positioned to implement progressive reforms and make a difference to the lives of their people.

Leveraging a global network

Every year, we mobilize a global network of scholars. In 2010-2013, this was estimated to be 949 scholars, of whom 52% were from the South and nearly half were women. During this period, about 50% of our collaborating researchers were engaged on the basis of open competition. Working with UNRISD affords Southern researchers access to multidisciplinary research networks, including South-South connections, and gives them a pathway for promoting their work on the global stage and, in particular, within the United Nations system. Through network activities like project-based methodology workshops, Northern and Southern researchers discuss and share methods and views, resulting in true co-production of knowledge from the design stage of a research project through to delivery.

Training African decision makers: Transformative social policy

Our capacity-building impact also extends to policy officials in developing countries. As a direct result of our network’s ability to bring our work to bear, our research and findings on social policy in a development context form the basis for an annual training programme on Social Policy for Development Planners, organized by UN-IDEP (the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning). Building directly on UNRISD research findings and emphasizing the close synergies between economic and social policies, the course brings together officials from different sectors to understand how policies across different domains can lead to better social development outcomes. It specifically targets officials involved in planning, economics and social ministries, as well as foreign and diplomatic affairs, with the aim of developing a critical mass of highly skilled mid-level and senior decision makers with a strong social policy orientation. These policy makers are then equipped to design and manage development plans in which social and economic policies are integrated to deliver better socioeconomic security for their citizens.

Developing Korean capacity for South-South cooperation

As the Republic of Korea emerged as a new donor and DAC member, the Korean development agency (KOICA) approached UNRISD to assist it in understanding lessons from its own development experience that could, in turn, inform its development assistance policies. In particular, it was concerned to assess the forms of social policies that had supported Korea’s rapid, relatively equitable and inclusive growth. The results of this research have been disseminated widely to KOICA field staff and have served as key resources at a number of international meetings, including the 5th Seoul ODA International Conference (of which we were an organizing partner), the Korean government’s preparations for the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, and a UNDP Policy Dialogue, for which our researchers shaped the agenda.

“Bringing people together from different areas generates interactions that not only enrich, but also transform, the research process itself. That experience informs my work in the classroom, and with policy makers at the national level.”

Response to the Stakeholder Survey in the 2014 DFID evaluation
“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.”

Lao-Tzu

UNRISD provides both the sparks and a critical environment for innovative and challenging ideas. We are strategically positioned to engage with the major concerns of a post-2015 agenda—ending poverty, reducing inequality, promoting gender equity, realizing human rights and attaining social justice within ecological limits.

Our systemic approach means we consider issues in a holistic way: we focus on the intersections between the key policy domains of the sustainable development agenda—social, environmental and economic—while daring to address the politics of policy change and the challenges of financing and implementing an ambitious transformative agenda.

Together with our partners, we are driving the development agenda in the direction of equity, justice and rights for all.

“For an idea to be successful it must come as a spark that enlightens the environment. ... Ideas are nothing in a vacuum; a culture must exist to receive them.”

Fernand Braudel

UN staff in Geneva
3,431,920 average annual expenditure in US dollars
949 members of the UNRISD network; 52% Southern and 50% women
540 research outputs
730 known bibliographic citations
557 opportunities for influence via events and advisory activities
71,888 YouTube views of Green Economy and Sustainable Development: Bringing Back the Social

Based on 2010-2013 figures
“Now more than ever, as the world faces the global challenges of the twenty-first century, it is essential that the United Nations continues its role as a powerhouse for ideas.”

Ban Ki-Moon