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Perspectives on Social Development Research at the Millennium

*Report of the UNRISD International Conference
Rayong, Thailand, 26–28 May 1999*

Introduction

During two and one-half days at the end of May 1999, UNRISD held a conference designed to provide new perspectives on social development research. The meeting formed part of a year-long effort to review the current UNRISD research programme and to generate new ideas for future work. This, in turn, was related to a broader attempt to evaluate the role of the Institute in the development debate at the turn of the millennium, and to consider ways of improving the effectiveness of UNRISD activities.

Twenty-two social scientists attended the meeting, which was held in Rayong, Thailand. They came from six regions (Africa, Asia, Central Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and Western Europe), and could draw on professional experience in other parts of the world as well. Thus it was possible to obtain insights from work in Central Asia, although no Central Asian was present, and to develop useful comparisons across a wide variety of societies, cultures and political systems. This advantage was reinforced by the presence of representatives from three regional research consortia: the Latin American Social Science Research Council (CLACSO), the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), and the European Association of Development Institutes (EADI).

The conference agenda and a list of participants may be found at the end of this report. The structure of the meeting was flexible and open-ended. Participants were provided with a preliminary version of a document titled **UNRISD 2000+**, containing a brief explanation of the mandate and research strategy of the Institute, as well as a summary of recent research programmes and thoughts on areas in which future work could be especially useful. This set the stage for discussions, but the structure and content of the meeting were not directly determined by it. Conversations flowed informally in order to allow new ideas and comparisons to develop.

Discussions at the meeting can be roughly summarized under three main headings. First, participants commented on how UNRISD currently operates, and made suggestions for strengthening the role of the Institute in the development arena. Then there was a more general critique of existing development paradigms, including a plea for critical evaluation of the concepts and methodologies currently in vogue within the social science/social policy communities. Third, there was lively debate on priority themes for future research in each of the regions represented at the meeting. Participants also broke briefly into small groups, on the afternoon of the second day, to discuss ways of sharpening the Institute's focus on future research in specific programme areas.

UNRISD and the International Community

UNRISD is an unusually open space for research and dialogue within the UN system. Its autonomy not only frees it from many of the operating constraints that weigh on intergovernmental organizations, but also allows great latitude in the selection of topics to be included in the research programme. This flexibility, in itself, is one of the “comparative advantages” of the Institute.

Nevertheless, UNRISD pays a price for its independence. It receives no core funding from the United Nations system and is perennially dependent on short-term contributions from governments, international organizations and foundations. The fragility of UNRISD finances makes it particularly important to prioritize Institute activities, so that the greatest possible benefits can be obtained from limited resources.

bal research networks—and thus to gain comparative perspective and contacts—is at least as important as access to funding.

In fact, the point was repeatedly made that high-level work on important social issues can often be funded nationally. And in that case, the comparative advantage of UNRISD lies in its international brief and global perspective, not in its capacity to finance local research. A number of people noted that relatively small, but strategic, grants to members of Third World research networks could have much greater impact than efforts to set large programmes in motion in a few developing countries.

There was also agreement on another element in the “strategic” use of available UNRISD resources: the need to give special priority to the earliest and latest stages in the design and execution of comparative research. At the very beginning of a truly comparative effort, it

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Participants in the Rayong meeting insisted on thinking critically about “UNRISD-with-limited-resources”. The Institute’s autonomous space can be used to support many broad debates, providing maximum (but relatively shallow) coverage of important issues, or it can be devoted to more in-depth treatment of a few strategic issues. There was considerable support for the latter alternative. The opinion of a number of participants was summarized in the suggestion that the Institute identify a few areas of central concern, develop strategic alliances around them, and become a “discourse maker” in its chosen fields of endeavour.

This implies a strategic use of networking, not only in order to establish links between Institute programmes and the researchers and activists already working in fields given priority by UNRISD, but also to create new synergies by broadening possibilities for interaction among people in various regions who might otherwise not know of the efforts being undertaken by colleagues in other parts of the world. Participants insisted on the key role of UNRISD as “coalition former and forum builder”; and they stressed the fact that, for Third World researchers, the opportunity to take part in glo-

is important to have time and money for developing a common research strategy; but funds are rarely available for this. UNRISD could make a real contribution to improving the relevance of international research if it invested in better pre-project planning.

At the same time, the Institute should allocate larger amounts than are usually available for post-project dissemination. It is not easy to present the findings from complex, holistic and cross-cultural research, in ways that are easily understandable to large numbers of people. If they are to be widely relevant, research findings should be tailored to different audiences and users; and this requires access to an adequate budget for the purpose. The systematic promotion of translation is obviously a central element in such a strategy. UNRISD must not be content to channel research results in large measure toward English-speakers.

Translation is in a sense a metaphor for a larger problem: the need to encourage a better circulation of ideas within the international community. At present, there is a great deal of innovative thinking on social problems and development issues in Africa, Asia, Latin

America and the Middle East that never enters the mainstream development debate. Information tends to flow relentlessly from North to South; and this is a distortion which impoverishes global thinking on development. UNRISD must work with conviction to redress this imbalance.

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In sum, then, participants envisioned UNRISD as a “voice” and a “bridge”—an institution whose limited resources and unusual international position should be used to break down existing barriers between North and South, between academic and policy debates, between discrete disciplines and among competing international institutions. It should serve as “a window of the United Nations on the world” of research and policy debates in different cultures and societies and, conversely, as a window through which the world of national and local research gains access to the international system.

UNRISD as Discourse Maker

The global mandate of UNRISD provides both an opportunity and an obligation to question prevailing mindsets within the “development community”, and to analyse the way received wisdom is translated into policy in various parts of the world. This role was given highest priority by most participants in the Rayong conference. There was a general conviction that the

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neoliberal paradigm, increasingly ascendent during the final decades of the twentieth century, has proved its inability to provide acceptable solutions for many of the most pressing problems of the moment. Yet contemporary social science research is heavily influenced by this discourse, and social and economic policy throughout much of the world is shaped by its tenets.

The problem, as a number of people noted, is not to go back to old paradigms, but to work toward new forms of solidarity and broad-based economic growth. UNRISD can provide a forum for new thinking along these lines, and a hub around which critical research can be organized. In fact, as participants emphasized when comparing the recent manifestations of crisis in Asia with earlier experiences in Africa, Latin America and Western Europe, there is a great deal of accumulated experience with reform and restructuring in various parts of the world that can be drawn on to challenge the dominant paradigm and suggest new policy approaches.

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Such an effort can proceed along various lines. It can reevaluate earlier social and economic theory, exploring interpretations of dependency and imperialism, counterposing neoliberalism and structuralism, institutional economics and new growth theory—all with an eye to explaining current problems. It can promote debates on new societal models, like those associated with the “information revolution” or the “knowledge society”. And it can question, in a relatively systematic fashion, the meaning of global catchwords (like “governance” and “civil society” and “competitiveness”) that form the infrastructure of the predominant development discourse.

Participants in the Rayong meeting were particularly interested in the latter approach. As one person put it, applying the methods associated with the sociology of knowledge could be extremely useful in deconstructing the concepts that are now such an integral part of our thinking. What, for example, does the idea of “social safety nets” imply? (“Everyone is an acrobat in the circus, and the most we can expect is that, when we fall, we will not die.”) What is the intellectual and social history of this term? And how about the concept of “targeting”, with its strong suggestion of mastery and manipulation? How does use of the term “social capital” reflect changing views of society and culture?

Even terms like “the North” and “the South”, or “developing countries”, which are the stock and trade of “development studies”, are less and less able to capture central elements of the social and economic situation

at the end of the twentieth century. To an increasing extent, North and South are present within each country, and both development and underdevelopment are occurring within a few miles of each other. Furthermore, concepts like “East” and “West” draw misleadingly clear lines across the map of an ever more complex and heterogeneous world.

In the course of the discussion, it became obvious that many of the catchwords of late twentieth-century development thinking also have different connotations in different settings. There was, for example, an intriguing exchange on the concept of “market failure”, which

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is utilized by neoliberal economists as a residual category—a reason for justifying public policy in areas where the market proves unable to allocate resources efficiently. Eastern Europeans, attempting to deal with the social cost of an extremely rapid transition to market economies, may use the concept to signify a much broader failure of market mechanisms to provide social protection (a “failure of the market”). And others may object strenuously to any use at all of this concept within the field of social policy. There are elements of human existence that should never be judged in terms of market relations, whatever the efficiency of the latter.

It might well be useful for UNRISD to commission small studies, by region, that illustrate and problematize the way such concepts are being employed. At the same time, participants suggested other ways to problematize constituent elements of the predominant paradigm, focusing less on the meaning of concepts than on the concrete social arrangements that seem necessarily to underpin some central institutions of the late twentieth-century economy. How could one look at the social construction of free trade in particular national contexts? If a “new financial architecture” is designed, what are its social prerequisites?

All of this has the effect of inserting new forms of social analysis into ostensibly economic debates. And in fact, the Institute has just begun a programme of research and dialogue that pursues a similar goal through still another approach: the promotion of a

historically informed theoretical dialogue between economists and other social scientists on the relation between economic growth/development and social policy in different country settings.

There is, however, still another strategy that can be employed to challenge the predominant paradigm—a strategy that relies not (immediately) on counterposing the social to the narrowly economic, but on asserting the elemental human rights of every human being. Mainstreaming human rights raises a host of questions about neoliberal theory and practice that are both researchable and compelling. They lead, in this day and age, rather inevitably to questions about transnational institutions and global governance. And, at a number of different levels within society, they are concerned with the construction of citizenship.

In addition to human rights, members of the group at Rayong considered mainstreaming a number of other concerns: looking systematically, for example, at development questions in terms of their implications for children, or for young people. Mainstreaming gender has, of course, also become an important approach. And in many social settings, the overwhelming importance of the AIDS epidemic could be reason enough to think of mainstreaming a consideration of AIDS throughout the development debate. Adopting such strategies forces social scientists, activists and policy makers to rethink some of the ideas they usually take for granted. It exposes new social relations, or gives them different analytical priority. And the cumulative effect of this exercise can be an important element in paradigmatic change.

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Finally, conference participants underlined the need to move away from a reactive—almost defeatist—critique of neoliberalism. One person called this the “ambulance approach”, in which appeals to social development are made solely in remedial terms. We should not simply be picking up the pieces of broken lives. It is time to take the offensive, to stand for a new vision of society, to counterpose a new consensus to Davos or Washington. As many organizations within the United

Nations system explore new approaches, this might become a “Geneva consensus”, which would be entirely consonant with the spirit of the World Summit for Social Development.

Regional Perspectives on Research Priorities

The meeting was organized in a way that highlighted regional perspectives on research priorities at the turn of the millennium. This proved illuminating, not only for what it showed about sharp differences among—and within—regions, but also because there were often common concerns, cutting across regions, but still likely to be interpreted from somewhat different vantage points. The overall picture of prevailing social conditions that emerged from the discussion was sombre.

In the following paragraphs, elements of the Rayong dialogue most clearly associated with a particular regional focus are presented in summary form. Other ideas, discussed at length by all participants, are integrated into the following section of the report.

Central Asia

This is a region where “development is running in reverse”. The five Central Asian republics cut off from the Soviet Union in 1991 have been unable to restructure their economies or to provide their population with social services. Poverty is increasing rapidly and environmental degradation has in some areas reached dangerous proportions. Women are caught between their pre-independence communist identity and an Islamic identity that seriously impinges on their human rights.

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Afghanistan and Iran

In Afghanistan, no research is currently possible. But the question of women’s rights is uppermost in the mind of most observers and creates a serious dilemma for international agencies. If the latter remain in the country, they seem to condone the government’s repressive policies toward women. If they leave, many people who depend on them will starve. This conun-

drum should be examined more carefully in research on issues of global governance.

In comparison with this extreme situation, the Iranian experience is far more moderate. Women have been able to work and to study, and population policy has been progressive. Students of the relation between Islam, nationalism and feminism have a great deal to learn from recent Iranian history.

The Middle East

During the 1990s, the Middle East has witnessed a *cultural schism* between forces of modernization and restoration, secularism and religious faith. This has been associated with a growing tension between supranational and infra-national identities, and a consequent weakening of allegiance to the state. Obviously, democratization is extremely difficult when the very legitimacy of the state is in question.

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At the same time, Middle Eastern societies are beset by generational rigidity. Power is passed from older to younger elites with great difficulty, and there is in fact a trend toward authoritarian restoration. Nevertheless many groups are slowly building the necessary underpinnings for democratization (in a process described by one participant as “lateral democratization”): people are creating public spaces, forming coalitions, reforming the legal and legislative systems. Research is necessary to support this process of institution building, to contribute to post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, and to advance our understanding of the relation between religion and politics.

Research is also necessary to evaluate the experience of Middle Eastern countries with structural adjustment. There seems to be a significant gap between the progress reflected in macroeconomics statistics, on the one hand, and the deepening livelihood crisis experienced by the majority of people, on the other. Much of the discourse on stabilization and adjustment remains detached from the real world of economic activity in the region. It is important both to evaluate the accuracy of leading statistics and to explore new ways of reflecting key economic and social trends.

Africa

African participants in the Rayong conference placed particular emphasis on the devastating effects of militarization and warfare across large areas of the continent. In the first round of discussions, they proposed research on the militarization of the state, the privatization of security, the economic implications of warfare and the culture of war. The global arms trade is also a subject deserving attention.

The prevalence of warfare (whether international or civil) is associated with a more general trend toward social disintegration, in which the line between political and criminal violence is blurred. There is furthermore a tendency in some regions for the struggle for control over natural resources to play a central role both in international conflict and in vicious civil strife. In a sharp shift from “classic” guerrilla situations, “bands of armed thugs”, financed by their access to diamonds or oil, can operate in rural areas without ever having to obtain the acquiescence—much less the loyalty—of the local population.

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The memory of atrocities haunts a growing number of people in Africa, as it does in many parts of the world where ethnic and political conflict has set neighbours against each other. Participants from both Africa and the Middle East pointed out the importance of studying recent attempts to lay the institutional and psychological bases for reconciliation, to ferret out the truth and to administer justice. Reconstructing civility is an extraordinarily difficult undertaking.

Faced with rapidly declining levels of living and the breakdown of many public services, a growing number of people in Africa reinforce their ethnic or religious identities. Such attempts to strengthen bonds of solidarity are exclusivist: they rest on the creation of closed organizations that work against a broad public ethos. Furthermore, many ethnic and religious groups have or are developing transnational ties. The new ease of communication facilitates this process, as does the existence of expatriate communities in distant parts of the world. Research on the social, cultural and political implications of diaspora could be very illuminating in this regard.

Finally, it is imperative to promote comparative, cross-disciplinary studies on the effectiveness of different approaches to AIDS. The pandemic is decimating communities and nations, leaving children without parents,

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schools without teachers, and households without the capacity to provide for their members. What approaches seem most promising in the fight against this scourge? What kinds of public awareness campaigns have been most effective, and why? What medical techniques and training hold some hope for success? What can, and should, international agencies do about the power of multinational corporations, which currently determine who may or may not have access to the medicines that hold promise for blocking the advance of the disease?

Latin America

Although Latin America has been the scene of cruel political persecution and internal warfare at various points in the past, problems of state collapse do not rank high on the list of regional concerns. Social research interests focus more frequently on the problems associated with relatively strong, authoritarian states than on those created by weak ones.

Latin American participants raised issues of democratic transition. They were concerned as much with “social movements” as with “civil society”, reflecting the continuing importance of many organized sectors of society

Latin American participants were concerned with “social movements” and with “civil society”, reflecting the continuing importance of many organized sectors of society in the struggle to create more inclusive political systems.

in the struggle to create more inclusive political systems. And they felt that research could usefully be done on the changing relation between social movements and the state, as the opposition gains power and “outsiders” become “insiders”.

Democratic institutions can be shallow, overlying deeper structures of authority and forms of gover-

nance that are still fundamentally discriminatory and exclusionary. Since the kind of economic adjustment implemented over the past few decades in Latin America has served to worsen long-standing problems of economic polarization, it has worked against the construction of more humane and just societies. In fact, what one tends to find in the region is “symbolic inclusion, through formal democracy, combined with growing economic marginalization”.

Young people pay a particularly high price for such patterns of development. They are being excluded in very large numbers from meaningful participation in economies that have managed to “adjust” and “stabilize” without generating decent jobs for most people. This is a phenomenon visible around the world, as young adults increasingly find themselves condemned to the category of “eternal youth” (an image put forward in the context of discussions on Africa, but equally applicable to many other parts of the globe). Without the means to strike out on their own, to establish new families and assume the responsibilities of adulthood, they must simply pass their days on the fringes of society. This is an untenable situation, closely associated in some parts of Latin America with mass migration and, in Africa and the Middle East, with growing problems of ethnic and religious conflict.

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The exclusion of young people also encourages lawlessness. Latin Americans are worried about the violence that is spreading throughout their societies, not usually as a concomitant of religious or ethnic tensions, but in association with impoverishment, drug trafficking, and a more general increase in crime. Global networks play an increasingly important role in this syndrome.

They are also worried about corruption. This is a scourge that is becoming more widespread, or at least more visible, in many parts of the world. It is the other side of the coin of “transparency”. The redistributive implications of institutionalized corruption are not well analysed, but it seems likely that they change during periods of crisis and restructuring. (One participant noted signs in Southeast Asia that a form

of corruption previously associated with maintenance of populist clienteles is now giving way to more “oligopolistic” practices, in which large sums flow toward a much more restricted inner circle of businessmen and politicians.)

South Asia

As are countries in Latin America, India is attempting to strengthen democratic institutions within a context of widespread poverty and enormous inequality

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of opportunity. But poverty is not worsening appreciably, and the country is experimenting with important programmes of affirmative action, which aim to offset the long-standing disadvantages of women, and of members of certain castes and ethnic groups.

This is an experience well worthy of study. As participants noted during later discussions on social policy, India is a world leader in designing and implementing affirmative action programmes; and there is much to be learned from exploring the technical, political and social implications of its effort.

Debates on the measurement of poverty also surfaced when talking of South Asia. Do the concepts and methodologies underlying the analysis of poverty in India take adequate account of gender differences? Do they take account of what might be called “time poverty”? And more generally, is the discussion of poverty, within the international community, distorted by its insistence on looking at what individuals and groups *do not* have, rather than what they *do* have?

Is the discussion of poverty, within the international community, distorted by its insistence on looking at what individuals and groups do not have, rather than what they do have?

The Rayong group felt that there is ample room for improving both conceptualization and measurement of poverty, not only at global and national levels but also in local contexts.

China

The presentation on China stressed the need for stability at a time of very rapid change. Although democratization is occurring within the Chinese Communist Party, and human rights are more openly discussed than before, political order still has priority.

China confronts particularly serious problems associated with mass migration to cities—and this is a challenge faced by many other countries in Asia as well. Comparative analysis of policies being implemented by governments throughout the region would be most useful. It is also important to look at the nature of remedies being proposed by different urban interest groups, including attempts to send migrants back to their villages, as a response to economic crisis, and measures to prevent new arrivals from settling in certain parts of the metropolitan area. The economic and political struggle for control over urban space was particularly emphasized by meeting participants familiar with developments in India.

To cope with the difficulties of governing increasingly unmanageable urban agglomerations, new forms of local and municipal authority are being designed—in some countries and cities with significant technical assistance from international financial institutions. During discussion of the Chinese case, both Latin American and Indian participants remarked on the tendency for responsibility in their countries to be vested in neighbourhood groups and local councils without creating sufficient capacity for them to fund their new activities. In such cases, the reform of urban governance can prove to be little more than an abdication of accountability on the part of metropolitan authorities.

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Like many other countries, China confronts serious social problems, as migration and economic reform erode existing forms of social provision, and unemployment rises precipitously. A rapidly aging population also creates new pressures on social services and family resources. New forms of social security and social protection must be created, and here there is ample scope for exchanging insights and findings with researchers in other parts of the world.

Southeast Asia

The social and political consequences of recent economic crisis formed the leitmotif of presentations by Southeast Asian participants in the Rayong conference. Many of the same questions asked by Latin American

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and African scholars several decades ago, when these regions were first exposed to similar financial pressures, must now form essential parts of the research agenda in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. What are the implications of economic crisis for transitions from authoritarianism to democracy? What are its implications for religious and ethnic conflict? Are women likely to be differentially affected by the crisis? How will families cope with unemployment and falling wages? How will structures of social provision be modified?

Beyond the kinds of questions that probe “consequences” and “implications” of economic crisis and restructuring, there are others that ask *why* this particular crisis occurred—exploring the social *bases* of certain vulnerable structures and processes of change. This form of analysis is also necessary in Southeast Asia. Although it begins within national borders—with research on the institutions that both stood behind the economic miracle and eventually contributed to its collapse—such research cannot be limited to the national level. Ultimately, it must go on to consider the network of relations, institutions and values underlying the international economic regime, and thus the meaning and nature of late twentieth-century “globalization”.

Central Europe

Unlike other regions discussed above, Central Europe has been characterized by well-developed social welfare systems; and in the post-Soviet transition to market economies and democratic governance, these arrangements are—like everything else—undergoing reform. Two of the major issues in the current debate on welfare policy centre around the proper balance between public and private provision of services, and modalities for the decentralization of management and finance. Privatization of pension funds is also on the policy agenda.

Falling output and income, increasing inequality and poverty place great strains on the system of social provision. But in countries like Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, it has not fallen apart. The problem that caught the attention of participants at the Rayong meeting was how to change the political and institutional bases for social protection, so that an arrangement once entirely under the control of an authoritarian state can evolve in the direction of social democracy.

The problem that caught the attention of participants at the Rayong meeting was how to change the political and institutional bases for social protection, so that “winners and losers become citizens” with social rights.

One person phrased the challenge in terms of “reconstructing the social contract, so that winners and losers become citizens” with social rights. But this requires strong civic participation; and there was some pessimism concerning the current strength of “civil society” in Central Europe. There is a tendency for people to feel hopeless and to concentrate more on what they have lost than on what they might gain.

What, then, are the historical conditions under which social democracy has flourished? And are these replicable today? This was a question raised early in the discussion on Southeast Asian, Latin American and Central European experiences with economic crisis and reform, and recurring throughout the meeting.

Crosscutting Issues

Sustainability

One of the most salient threads of common concern at the Rayong meeting was sustainability, interpreted not only—or even primarily—in environmental terms,

... sustainability, interpreted not only—or even primarily—in environmental terms, but understood to reflect much broader questions of political order and social cohesion.

but understood to reflect much broader questions of political order and social cohesion. This is a period of sharp discontinuities, in which both public and private efforts to reform old institutions, and create new ones,

have enjoyed only limited success. The life of many bold experiments has been short. Models of social and economic organization imported from abroad have often proved wanting, and sometimes fail spectacularly.

The crisis engulfing most Asian countries from 1997 onward constitutes the latest and most dramatic challenge to “sustainability” in the pursuit of national development, and this crisis formed a backdrop for much of the discussion. But issues of institutional reform, within a context of global economic reorganization, are common to all countries involved in processes of transition—a term which, like so many others, imposes seeming order on widely different experiences.

Transition

The need for comparative studies of transition (or what someone called “transitology”) was repeatedly stressed at Rayong. Why do some countries deal better than others with the challenges posed by a chaotic and competitive global economic environment? Why have some countries in Eastern Europe and the CIS been relatively more adept at managing the transition from planned to market economies? What elements in the development histories of countries in Africa and Latin America seem to play a role in their relative ability to sustain economic reform?

Why do some countries deal better than others with the challenges posed by a chaotic and competitive global economic environment?

Although much can be learned from such studies, there are grounds for caution when using concepts like “success” and “failure” in this field. Success, when viewed from one vantage point, may be failure when viewed from another. Thus the group of African countries currently considered by international financial institutions to be noteworthy examples of successful reform are, in the opinion of one participant, among the least successful in creating legitimate bases of internal political support.

The link between economic and political reform—the requirement for what might be called a “double transition”—is complex. If this transition is imposed by a coalition of external advisors and their internal allies, through technocratic fiat, the outcome will have little long-term support. When debate on various alternatives is conducted openly, progress is likely to be slow.

Social policy

If strengthening democratic governance is considered a *sine qua non* of social progress—and from the perspective of the United Nations there is no question that this is the case—then the formulation of social policy constitutes one of the most important arenas in which links between economic reform and democratic legitimacy must be made. A number of participants stressed the importance of promoting new research on *social policy and democratic governance*, as well as on the relationship between *social policy and economic development*. This was a common interest, across all regions; and it gave rise to an interesting discussion on the usefulness of sponsoring cross-cultural studies on the *politics of social policy making*.

The advantage of focusing on politics, when conducting social policy studies, is that such an approach emphasizes the importance of *process*. And, in fact, the content of policy (whether concerned with health or education or income support, or any other area of social promotion and protection) is ultimately determined far less by impartial studies or the weight of scientific reason than by negotiation and debate among groups with specific interests. Even after the framing of official statutes and guidelines, politics continue to shape the way social policies are implemented in specific times and places. This is true not only because groups within the

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population at large may continue to express their preferences and concerns through political means, but also because there is a “micro-politics” of administration that plays a significant role in shaping the content of policy.

Participants in the Rayong meeting also felt that it would be inadvisable to frame studies of the politics of social policy solely in terms of local or national issues and processes. One of the defining characteristics of the past few decades has been the rapidly growing importance of international factors in the social policy arena, and this must be reflected in any comparative research programme in this field.

Sustainable democratic polities and civil society

Democratic polities (sustainable democratic polities, which manage to avoid the all-too-frequent syndrome of regression to authoritarianism or chaos) must be based on a civic culture, and on a set of relatively efficient and impartial public institutions, that are yet to be built in many countries. Not surprisingly, this is an area of concern that also received much attention in Rayong. The discussion proceeded along several parallel lines.

If we hope to understand both the potential for democratic participation and the difficulties standing in its way, it is necessary to “move away from the celebration of civil society” toward a more empirically grounded understanding of local cultures and politics.

One of these involved deconstructing the concept of “civil society”, which, like so many of the other catchwords of the late twentieth century, is more prescriptive than analytical. It was argued that if we hope to understand both the potential for democratic participation and the difficulties standing in its way, it is necessary to “move away from the celebration of civil society” toward a more empirically grounded understanding of local cultures and politics. Thus it is important to take a critical look at *patterns of authority in specific local institutions* (communities, households)—again mainstreaming concerns for gender, youth and human rights—and to analyse how these are being transformed during a period of rapid and chaotic change.

It is also necessary to encourage empirical research on the *relation between democratic participation and changing ethnic and religious identity*. The latter is obviously a central component in shaping notions of civility and solidarity—quite frequently for the worse. Both the content of specific ethnic and religious identities (their central values and beliefs) and their programmatic goals affect the nature of the political environment and the meaning of “civil society”.

Governance and institutional reform

Discussions in Rayong turned again and again to very specific problems of governance and institutional reform. There is, for example, a clear need to build or strengthen the basic institutions of democracy in many parts of the world: to improve legal systems, parlia-

mentary bodies, electoral procedures. UNRISD could encourage comparative research in these fields, and it could promote much-needed work on institutions that facilitate good governance in multi-ethnic societies.

There is a clear need to build or strengthen the basic institutions of democracy in many parts of the world: to improve legal systems, parliamentary bodies, electoral procedures.

The Institute could also give systematic attention to the difficulties that arise during attempts to implement administrative and political *decentralization* in various country settings. This is a reform much favoured by international lending institutions and widely adopted by governments, but its implementation has often had unintended consequences. In Rayong, numerous cases of failed or “perverse” decentralization were cited, in which higher levels of government simply transfer responsibilities to lower ones that do not have the financial or administrative capacity to carry them out. Local political structures may also prove less favourable to democratic governance than national ones.

In many situations (although certainly not all), decentralization in the Third World can be closely associated with *deinstitutionalization*, as national governments shed basic obligations and direct lines of authority are established between local governments or NGOs and international agencies or firms. A telling example was cited from India: municipal councils were given authority to raise and manage funds, and then found that their newly acquired power could not be exercised without prior authorization from the international consultancy firm that had been hired to supervise their activities.

Decentralization is a reform much favoured by international lending institutions and widely adopted by governments, but its implementation has often had unintended consequences. In many situations, decentralization in the Third World can be closely associated with deinstitutionalization, as national governments shed basic obligations and direct lines of authority are established between local governments or NGOs and international agencies or firms.

Statements at the Rayong meeting frequently ended with a plea to study the *international dimensions* of os-

tensibly national policy reform. In fact, national policy on a number of questions can only be understood by explaining the surrounding international context. Furthermore, it is clear that many Third World governments have difficulty fashioning a single, integrated position on issues being debated in global policy arenas. Telecommunications policy was taken as one example of this problem. Officials charged with regulating telecommunications operators in one African country were recently in Geneva, defending a national policy to promote universal access to telephone service. They were unaware of the fact that while they spoke at the headquarters of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), representatives of their own Ministry of Finance were to be found only a few blocks away, at the World Trade Organization (WTO), where they signed agreements that significantly limited any universal service initiative. Thus divisions within the international community itself are reflected within national governments, where particular ministries and officials have ties to specific international counterparts.

Statements at the Rayong meeting frequently ended with a plea to study the international dimensions of ostensibly national policy reform. It is clear that many Third World governments have difficulty fashioning a single, integrated position on issues being debated in global policy arenas.

UNRISD should provide an opportunity for systematic analysis of such “real world” problems of international negotiation. It is important not only to “map the different fora where decisions are being taken”, but also to draw the lines connecting national and international actors in particular policy spheres, and finally to analyse the processes through which decisions on particular issues are ultimately reached.

The gap between policy formulation and implementation

The Institute can also inject a note of realism into the field of social analysis by promoting discussion of factors that intervene to change the nature of stated policies, as they work their way toward implementation. The difference between goals and outcomes is often not sufficiently noted in contemporary policy research. This was another of the common concerns expressed by many of those participating in the Rayong meeting.

Sharpening the Focus in UNRISD Programme Areas

Late on the second day of the conference, three working groups were formed to offer suggestions for future research within the six programme areas outlined below.

Group I: Identity and social movements

The group meeting began with a discussion on *globalization and identities*. The new ease of communication and travel around the world is creating extraordinary opportunities to forge new identities and maintain old ones. The process proceeds in what is often a highly instrumental fashion. For example, many converts to pentecostalism in Africa attempt to manipulate racial, religious or ethnic solidarity in order to do business. But there are countless networks in formation, linking people who share certain interests or characteristics; and the implications of this process for politics, culture and society are extremely complex.

Discussion turned to the role of religious and political identities in provoking civil war and national disintegration, particularly in the Middle East. The challenge is to construct a new secular identity, based on the concept of citizenship, which can serve as the basis for national reconstruction. An Institute programme on *pluralism, citizenship and political reconstruction* could be designed to explore such issues.

When asked to think about new research on social movements, members of the group preferred to broaden their original brief. They suggested that this area of UNRISD research be rephrased, so that it reflects more general concern with *social actors and changing policy agendas*. Under this heading, the Institute could sponsor work on *local self-organization and access to resources*, which could look at mobilization for land reform and at an array of other initiatives, including community development and urban renewal.

Group II: Governance and social policy

This group took a broad view of social policy, defining it as “policy with social implications”, and noted that in its view the field of social policy must ultimately be oriented toward defining and defending *social rights*. Such an approach has implications for the mandate of UNRISD, which should work against pressures for a residual approach to social policy and insist on the need to increase “social capabilities”.

The group went on to insist that, in studying social policy issues, the Institute should give special attention to questions of politics and process. It should distinguish between externally driven and internally developed policies, and it should systematically refer to standards put forward in international fora such as the World Summit for Social Development.

Members were not happy with the concept of *governance*, nor were they sure how one could ultimately define “good governance”. Is this, first and foremost, a *process*? Or is good governance to be judged above all as an outcome? There was no time to go further into this debate, which was left for another time.

Group III: Sustainable development, technology and society

As reported above, participants in the Rayong conference insisted on defining the idea of sustainability broadly, to include social, political and economic elements as well as environmental concerns. They also emphasized the cultural component in any understanding of what is “sustainable”, and they noted that definitions are likely to vary substantially from one place (or group) to another.

Within this area of UNRISD research, they suggested paying special attention to *resource-based conflict*. The struggle over control of water is especially acute in southern Africa and the Middle East and may contribute to the outbreak of war. Environmental factors can also affect the likelihood that some attempts to escape from economic crisis and political turmoil will fail. *Environmental security* is a cross-cutting issue that immediately suggests others (social and political rights, effective governance, and so forth). It is profoundly influenced by trends toward liberalization of markets, including land markets.

The group did not consider new ideas for research under the heading of technology and society. There was, however, some reference to new epidemiological challenges (like the pig virus sweeping Southeast Asia). There was also a recurring concern with trends toward corporate control over such basic scientific resources as genetic material, as well as over medicines that should in principle be made widely available in generic form.

Future Work at UNRISD

If there was one overriding message to emerge from the Rayong conference, it was insistence that UNRISD use its autonomy and global mandate to provide an opportunity for new thinking. There is a need for space, at the international level, within which alternatives to the neoliberal paradigm can be proposed. This must be an environment that is open to people of different disciplinary backgrounds and interests. It should allow for rigorous comparative research. And, above all, it should draw on the intellectual resources and inspiration of scholars and activists in the devel-

UNRISD must also make a systematic effort to involve other agencies of the United Nations system in this endeavour. The programmes and declarations of all the major world conferences of the 1990s—and particularly of the World Summit for Social Development—require joint action on the part of all members of the international community and commit them to search for new strategies of social progress in the coming years.

“UNRISD-with-limited-resources” must integrate its programme carefully and generate synergies among all its projects. Human rights, democratic participation,

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oping world, whose ideas are not sufficiently reflected in the current development discourse. Without this “diversification of the sites of production” (as one participant put it), genuine progress toward new worldviews seems unlikely.

gender equality and sustainable development (broadly understood) are concerns that should orient all work. Globalization is an omnipresent conditioning factor which, at this moment in the history of the world, must always be taken into account.

Agenda*

Wednesday, 26 May

09:00 - 10:00	Welcome
	Participant Introductions
10:00 - 10:30	Overview and Discussion of Agenda
10:30 - 11:00	COFFEE BREAK
11:00 - 13:00	Summary of Participants' Comments on Background Document
13:00 - 14:30	LUNCH
14:30 - 15:30	Priority Themes and Future Directions: Africa <i>Trends, problems and issues. What should be the priorities for social science research? Participants should focus on the conditions and trends in their region, rather than on personal research interests/projects.</i>
15:30 - 16:30	Priority Themes and Future Directions: Latin America
16:30 - 17:00	TEA BREAK
17:00 - 18:30	Priority Themes and Future Directions: Eastern Europe

* The meeting was financed
by a grant from the
Government of Finland.

Thursday, 27 May

09:00 - 10:00	Priority Themes and Future Directions: Asia
10:00 - 11:00	Priority Themes and Future Directions: Middle East
11:00 - 11:30	COFFEE BREAK
11:30 - 13:00	Summary of Regional Themes and Issues <i>Converging and contrasting themes. Relative importance of various issues in different regions.</i>
13:00 - 14:30	LUNCH
14:30 - 15:00	Instructions for Thematic Group Discussions
15:00 - 16:30	Thematic Group Discussions <i>What are the main sub-themes within the larger themes? How much research on these subjects is already going on in different regions? What are the principal gaps? How could UNRISD approach some of the key issues requiring further work?</i>
16:30 - 17:00	TEA BREAK
17:00 - 18:00	Thematic Group Discussions (continued)

Friday, 28 May

09:00 - 10:30	Reports from Thematic Groups
10:30 - 11:00	COFFEE BREAK
11:00 - 12:30	UNRISD's Role in the United Nations and in the International Research Community <i>What role should UNRISD play in international social science research? How could UNRISD interact more effectively with Southern research institutions and networks? How do the answers to these questions affect the way UNRISD deals with the research themes discussed over the last two days? Is there already collaboration between Northern and Southern institutions on these themes? Is there cross-national comparative research?</i>
12:30 - 13:15	Summing Up and Final Discussion
13:15	LUNCH

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The **United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)** is an autonomous agency engaging in multidisciplinary research on the social dimensions of contemporary problems affecting development. Its work is guided by the conviction that, for effective development policies to be formulated, an understanding of the social and political context is crucial. The Institute attempts to provide governments, development agencies, grassroots organizations and scholars with a better understanding of how development policies and processes of economic, social and environmental change affect different social groups. Working through an extensive network of national research centres, UNRISD aims to promote original research and strengthen research capacity in developing countries.

Current research programmes include: Civil Society and Social Movements; Democracy and Human Rights; Identities, Conflict and Cohesion; Social Policy and Development; and Technology and Society.

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