

## Call for Papers and Conference

### Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization

Persistent and rising inequalities are today considered one of the greatest challenges our world is facing. Inequalities in wealth and income have grown in most countries over the last four decades, obstructing poverty reduction and sustainable development. At the same time, efforts to end discrimination and guarantee equal rights and opportunities for all, especially historically marginalized groups such as women and minorities, have been experiencing backlashes in various places. These fractures are catalysed by growing elite capture of economic and political power, a reinforcing process that compounds inequality. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to overcome such disparities, “leaving no one behind”,<sup>1</sup> but how can this ambitious vision be achieved in the current climate in which those in power act to protect the status quo from which they benefit?

UNRISD is convening a conference at the United Nations in Geneva in November 2018 to explore these and more questions, creating a forum for analysis and dialogue that will bring together academics, UN representatives, policy makers and civil society. The conference marks the start of an UNRISD research inquiry into political processes that determine the prospects for progressive change towards sustainable development, which will run from 2018 to 2020.

Through this Call for Papers, UNRISD invites researchers and practitioners to submit proposals for papers to be presented at the conference that critically explore the various causes of deepening inequalities in the current context, their implications for sustainable development, and strategies and mechanisms being employed to reverse them. The papers, presentations and ensuing discussions at the UNRISD conference and in the subsequent research project will bring innovative research evidence, in particular from the Global South, into UN debates and policy processes, and contribute to concrete policy recommendations and a better understanding of how to build progressive alliances for more equitable, sustainable and just societies.

Key themes include:

- The role and influence of elites
- The role of institutions in perpetuating or curbing inequalities
- Shifting class structures and identities
- The effects of deepening inequalities on local lifeworlds
- Actors, alliances and social mobilization for progressive change

## Background and Context

### The Unravelling of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Social Compact under Neoliberal Globalization

The growing divide between the rich and the poor is one of the most pressing global challenges of our time. According to Oxfam, 42 people currently hold as much wealth as one half of the global population, 3.7 billion people.<sup>2</sup> Income and wealth inequality continues to increase at an alarming rate, despite the fact that some

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<sup>1</sup> UN (United Nations). 2015. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam. 2018. *Reward Work, Not Wealth*.

of the fastest growing countries in Asia have reduced the gap with developed economies in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> The global top 1 percent of earners captured 27 percent of real income growth between 1980 and 2016, more than twice the amount of the bottom 50 percent.<sup>4</sup> This unprecedented concentration of wealth and income, popularly referred to as the 1 percent economy, and the increase in the share of national income that capital is acquiring compared to labour,<sup>5</sup> are global processes girded by the dominance of neoliberal policies, rapid technological change, weak global and national tax governance, the erosion of labour rights, and corporate capture of political processes and state institutions. This process compounds inequality within and between countries, which—in its various dimensions—undermines social, environmental and economic sustainability, and fuels poverty, insecurity, crime and xenophobia.<sup>6</sup>

Vertical (income) and horizontal (group-based) inequalities, when intersecting, reinforce each other.<sup>7</sup> Poverty often exacerbates the structural violence and discrimination already suffered by individuals who belong to one or more marginalized groups. In the case, for example, of women and girls, there remain persistent and protracted gaps in achieving women's rights and realizing tangible progress on the ground, especially regarding labour rights, equal pay and a fair distribution of unpaid care work.<sup>8</sup> Vulnerable groups are also especially affected by conflict, crises, disasters or climate change, often leading to migration or flight, which tends to create new risks and hardships.

Despite concerted efforts to promote more inclusive development, economic and political drivers of inequality obstruct progress. Some business elites have gained a prominent foothold in political processes, often serving to preserve and perpetuate a system that benefits the few at the expense of the many. Their influence extends from media to elections to policy making, from the local to the transnational level, halting the possibilities for equitable redistribution. Backed up by mainstream theories and narratives of market liberalism, they are proving less and less willing to accept anything more than voluntary standards.<sup>9</sup> Tax evasion and avoidance persists by wealthy individuals and global companies alike, with an estimated 10 percent of global wealth currently held in tax havens.<sup>10</sup>

As the power of elites grows and societal gaps are widening, institutions representing the public good and universal values are increasingly disempowered or co-opted, and visions of social justice and equity sidelined. While progressive tides strengthened social contracts around the globe in the post-war era, the current moment is seeing a breakdown of such contracts. Many states are reducing social spending as part of austerity measures, rolling back rights for people and communities while granting privileges and protections to the business sector, supplanting meaningful spaces of civic engagement with divisive populist rhetoric, and shrinking public spaces through the selling off of the commons, making use, more than ever, of walls—be they physical or rhetorical—to drive the wedge even further between two vastly different worlds.

As a result, society is fracturing in ways that are becoming more and more tangible, with the growing divide between the privileged and the rest dramatically rearranging both macro structures and local lifeworlds. In the context of these compounding global crises, those with means have made use of them to shield

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<sup>3</sup> While global inequality has slightly declined in the last three decades, this is almost entirely due to the growth of India and China, see for example Milanovic, Branko. 2011. *Global inequality. A new Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>4</sup> World Inequality Lab. 2018. *World Inequality Report*.

<sup>5</sup> ILO (International Labour Organization). 2016. *Wage inequality in the workplace*. Global Wage Report 2016/17. Geneva: ILO.

<sup>6</sup> UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development). 2010. *Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics*. Geneva: UNRISD; Stiglitz, Joseph. 2013. *The Price of Inequality: The Avoidable Causes and Invisible Costs of Inequality*. New York: Norton.

<sup>7</sup> UNRISD 2010; Stewart, Frances. 2013. "Approaches towards Inequality and Inequity: Concepts, Measures and Policies." Discussion Paper: Perspectives on Equity. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research.

<sup>8</sup> UN Women. 2015. "Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights". New York: UN Women; UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development). 2016. "Policy Innovations for Transformative Change. Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." Geneva: UNRISD.

<sup>9</sup> Weeks, John. 2014. "Economics of the 1%: How mainstream economics serves the rich, obscures reality and distorts policy." London: Anthem Press; Utting, Peter. 2007. "CSR and Equality." *Third World Quarterly*, 28:4.

<sup>10</sup> World Inequality Lab 2018.

themselves from the worst effects of poverty, inequality, environmental challenges, violence and insecurity, often creating walled off private worlds.<sup>11</sup> Those without have been left to get by with underfunded and under-functioning public services, administered by states growing less and less accountable to their citizens. These cleavages have eroded social cohesion, citizenship practices and trust in public institutions, leaving deep fault lines that manifest economically, politically, socially and spatially. As a consequence, governments are increasingly perceived to lack capacity to foster inclusive development and to protect the well-being and rights of their citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly uncertain world.

### Drivers of Progressive Change

What forces have the potential to counter these tendencies? In the past, progressive policy change in industrialized democracies was often steered by broad cross-class coalitions between popular and middle classes that effectively pressured elites; in countries of the Global South, enlightened leaders and liberation movements often played a similar role. Over the last 40 years, however, we have witnessed the slow but continuous unravelling of this 20th century social contract—a bargain between the “economic imperatives of growth and productivity, and the social imperatives of redistribution and social protection.”<sup>12</sup> Those social and economic forces that underpinned progressive policy change of the past take a very different shape today, as economic systems have evolved, identities have shifted, new forms of politics have unfolded, and new conceptions of class have arisen.<sup>13</sup>

And while such spaces for progressive change have been closed, new ones are constrained by a range of factors: governments with a developmental and redistributive stance are increasingly stripped of resources and policy space in the context of neoliberal globalization and recurrent crises; middle classes are either moving towards precarity or increasingly aligned with elite interests, opting out of processes for the public good, motivated by various incentives including political stability, security and access to better life opportunities; identity groups among popular and middle classes consistently fail to mobilize around deeply shared interests, and are instead pitted against each other by nationalist and xenophobic discourses; the voice of the demos has begun to weigh less and less as the overwhelming economic dominance of elite sectors takes hold of political processes; and while recent social movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo Campaign, to name a few, have sprung up out of reinterpreted visions of citizenship, their long-term political impact is still an issue of inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

### Towards a New Eco-Social Compact: The Politics of Transformative Change

How do these realities affect progress towards a more equitable, sustainable and just world, an aspirational global vision encompassed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits all states to be part of a new global compact that will *leave no one behind*. It explicitly aims to tackle inequality within and between countries (SDG 10) and genders (SDG 5) and to promote peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16), three goals that exemplify the scope and depth of the new global development strategy and the strong engagement of a range of actors such as civil society organizations, activists and academics in its making.

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<sup>11</sup> Caldeira, Teresa. 2001. *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Holston, James ed. 1998. *Cities and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>12</sup> UNRISD 2016:215.

<sup>13</sup> Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic; Lentz, Carola. 2015. “Elites or middle classes? Lessons from transnational research for the study of social stratification in Africa.” Working Paper No. 161. Mainz: Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz; Crouch, Colin. 2004. *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, Nancy. 2013. “A triple movement?” *New Left Review*, 81:119-132; Amenta, Edwin et al. 2010. “The Political Consequences of Social Movements.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36:287-307.

While the aspirations of the Agenda are laudable, it is silent on a more substantive understanding of transformation, and how it will actually happen. UNRISD has made a first step in its 2016 flagship report to unpack the concept of transformative change, central for the SDGs, by defining it as attacking the root causes of poverty, inequality and environmental destruction instead of the symptoms.<sup>15</sup> It has also identified innovative policies grounded in principles of universalism, human rights and social justice as conducive to transformative change. What is needed now is a better understanding of the politics of transformative change: how can effective and durable national and global compacts be forged between the multiple stakeholders addressed in the SDGs?

Indeed, if the 2030 Agenda is to achieve success, it must move beyond the 20th century compact in two crucial aspects: first, by extending the social contract beyond the Global North and ensuring the expansion of rights to all, including the historically marginalized, such as women, informal workers and minorities; and second, by shifting and restructuring economies and societies to halt climate change and environmental destruction. Given these imperatives, the 21st century compact envisioned by Agenda 2030 must be nothing less than an *eco-social* compact.

## What the UNRISD Conference Aims to Deliver

This conference aims to deliver on both research and policy-related objectives. In terms of research objectives, it aims to mobilize relevant and untapped research, in particular new evidence and concepts from the Global South, on the causes and consequences of inequality and social exclusion, as well as research on the politics of redistributive and social or climate justice policies, with a particular emphasis on the role of elites, cross-class coalitions and new progressive alliances, and the structural factors that have a bearing on their agency. It further aims to apply an integrated analysis, combining different perspectives, approaches and disciplines. Such a conceptual lens reveals the interrelatedness of the problems at stake, and helps to identify knowledge gaps that will inform future UNRISD research on this theme.

In terms of policy-related objectives, the conference aims to facilitate knowledge exchange and mutual learning, across academia, civil society, the UN and national governments, about progressive alliances and policy change for more equitable, sustainable, and just societies. It will propose evidence-based recommendations for innovative ways in which diverse actors can work together to design and deliver a transformative *eco-social* compact for the 21st century; and bring this new evidence and analysis, especially from the Global South, to bear on UN debates and policy processes, including implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

UNRISD will disseminate the evidence and key recommendations from the papers and conference discussions in formats that will support practitioners, activists and decision makers at local, national, regional and global levels.

## Questions and Issues to be Addressed:

Through this Call for Papers, UNRISD invites proposals that address the following themes and questions.

1. **The role and influence of elites.** Elites constitute a unique social group defined by their disproportionate control over resources—be they economic, political, cultural—and their ability to translate those resources into power, influence and other forms of capital.<sup>16</sup> They are often linked much more closely to each other across linguistic, cultural and geographic divides than to citizens of their own nations. How have these elites and elite networks brought about the deepening of social

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<sup>15</sup> UNRISD 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Khan, Shamus. 2012. "The Sociology of Elites." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38:361-77.

and economic cleavages across the globe? What are the motivations for elites to work together, what are the tools used, and what impact has this had on global political shifts? What role have elites played in engendering or inhibiting transformative change in the past, and what might motivate elites to engage in progressive alliances? What can encourage and incentivize, or pressure, elites—who control economies and political systems—to promote policies that lessen their share of influence? What role does philanthropy play, be it positive or negative?

2. **The role of institutions in perpetuating or curbing inequalities.** Unequal power relations and inequalities are maintained and reinforced through formal and informal institutions ranging from electoral rules to education systems, property rights, access to finance and capital, and social norms. Which kinds of policies and institutional structures are most effective in moving countries towards greater equality and which ones further entrench divisions? How can social policies and institutions be used to either create spaces for marginalized actors—including women, minorities and popular classes—to have a slice of the pie, or create a barrier across which certain kinds of actors cannot move? Which institutions and regulations at national, regional and global levels can rein in elite power for the sake of public interest?
3. **Shifting class structures and identities.** Organized labour was a crucial actor in the construction of modern welfare states, whereas middle-class buy-in has been equally important for guaranteeing sustainable financing and quality control of public social services. How have class structures and identities shifted in the age of neoliberalism and rapid technological progress that is changing the world of work, and what does this shift imply for the possibility of progressive alliances for social change? What factors push some segments of middle classes rightwards while they incite disengagement in others, and how can middle classes be reincorporated into a project of progressive social change? What is the role of labour movements in times of a growing and diversifying precariat in both the Global South and North? How do intersecting identities such as class, gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity play out in political mobilization and what is the role of politics of recognition?
4. **The effects of deepening inequalities on local lifeworlds.** Such inequalities often come to a head most visibly at the local level, spaces in which those at either end of the spectrum engage with each other on a daily basis, mediated through various forms of power relations and social, spatial and economic barriers. How do these cleavages impact daily life, and what consequences (economic, political, environmental, human) do they pose for a city, a country or individual lives? What effects have these fractures had on the social and spatial arrangements of communities—in particular through the closing out of public space and access to services and infrastructure—and what new challenges do these pose for groups such as women, the poor, and minorities, as well as the ecosystems they inhabit? As new lines are drawn, how are practices of citizenship being reshaped and what spaces for progressive change are being closed out—or opening up—as a result? What motivates choices to either opt out of a commitment to the public good through access to private means or to participate in an inclusive social compact?
5. **Actors, alliances and social mobilization for a new eco-social compact.** Several countries have implemented innovative policy approaches and succeeded in implementing reforms with progressive outcomes, from the local to the national level, curbing inequalities, sharing costs and benefits of reforms more fairly, and making their societies more just and green.<sup>17</sup> Non-state actors such as social movements, civil society organizations, social and solidarity economy actors and private businesses are engaging in activities that are promising an eco-social turn. What are the experiences and prospects of these actors to contribute to broader processes of change in their societies? What examples exist of peaceful processes of policy change that have levelled out social stratification and devolved power and resources from elites to non-elites, and what were the drivers or incentives in

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<sup>17</sup> UNRISD 2016.

those processes? Which factors support the creation of cross-class coalitions and other forms of social mobilization for progressive policy reforms and transformative change? What examples exist in which social cleavages have been held at bay, and what mechanisms have been employed in these cases—be they on the transnational, national, subnational or local level—to achieve social progress within planetary boundaries?

## Submission Process

The submission process for the Call for Papers will be open from **1 April to 29 April 2018** (extended from 20 April).

Please visit [www.unrisd.org/CallForPapers](http://www.unrisd.org/CallForPapers) as of 1 April 2018 and follow the instructions to create an account and upload the following:

- Your contact information
- An extended abstract (approximately 500 words), outlining the main issues, hypotheses, arguments, methodology, country/regional focus, case studies to be considered, structure of the paper and keywords
- CV

Submissions are accepted in English, French and Spanish.

## Key dates

Successful candidates will be notified by **15 June 2018** and invited to submit a draft paper (approximately 6,000 words), due no later than **31 August 2018**.

Some candidates will also be invited to prepare shorter think pieces of approximately 1,500 words for publication on the UNRISD website and global promotion via UNRISD's communication channels.

The International Conference is planned for **8-9 November 2018** at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. UNRISD aims to cover travel and accommodation costs for as many paper presenters as possible. In the event of financial restrictions, priority will be given to presenters from developing countries.

Subject to peer review, selected papers will be published under the UNRISD research paper series, in an edited volume through a commercial publisher, or as a special issue of an academic journal. They should, therefore, not be under consideration for publication elsewhere.

For further information, visit [www.unrisd.org/CallForPapers2018](http://www.unrisd.org/CallForPapers2018) or contact [katja dot hujo at un dot org](mailto:katja.hujo@un.org)