



UNRISD

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Overcoming Inequalities: Towards a New Eco-social Contract

UNRISD STRATEGY
2021-2025

UNRISD 1963-2023



years of research
for social change

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United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Established in 1963, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the United Nations system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

UNRISD depends entirely on voluntary contributions from national governments, multilateral donors, foundations and other sources. The Institute receives no financial support from the regular budget of the United Nations. In supporting UNRISD, our funding partners contribute to the crucial but often neglected goal of assuring a diversity of views and voices on development issues at the highest level in the global system.

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Overview

This Strategy sets out the priorities and themes of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development over the period 2021–2025. It integrates research, communications, policy engagement, results and impact—and is calibrated against the fast-moving social, economic and political context as it impacts on development. It is the product of work with a wide range of stakeholders, and takes on board policy concerns and academic debates. We aim to fill identified knowledge gaps and also to anticipate fast-evolving social issues that are not yet in the mainstream. We are proud to have been doing this important work since 1963, and look forward to celebrating the 60th Anniversary of UNRISD in 2023, the mid-point of this Strategy period.

A deeply challenging time for development

The global context for our work as we look ahead is incredibly challenging. Rising and systemic inequalities, climate change, environmental destruction and a global pandemic pose profound questions for our societies and institutions. In times of crisis, as history has shown, progressive trends and policies are contested, stalled and even reversed. And it is indeed the case that these crises will call into question progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as we approach the half-way point.

Profound questions call for new responses—opportunities for advancing a progressive agenda

While the forces threatening to reverse developmental gains are very real, UNRISD believes that today's fraught social, economic and political context equally constitutes a real opportunity to advance progressive, innovative thinking—an opportunity to “build forward better”—to re-imagine and reconfigure how societies are organized, supported by longer-term perspectives and increased investment in public services and resilient social and economic structures. Our unique position as an autonomous research institute within the United Nations system means we are well placed to advance and support such an agenda through our work—within the UN, and at national and local levels.

It is in such a spirit—of realism, positivity, determination and resourcefulness—that this document sets out our work for the next five years, organized across five programmes:



Collaboration with global networks— co-designing research, co-producing evidence

We collaborate with researchers and institutions from the global South in identifying both research areas and methodologies. We build interdisciplinary networks, co-producing knowledge, sharing lessons and engaging with partners to design, implement and deliver research. UNRISD's integrated approach encourages thinking outside of disciplinary silos and operates at intersections where the most innovative solutions to complex global development challenges are often imagined.



Staying close to our global stakeholder communities—leveraging our UN status

UNRISD leverages its strategic institutional location and relations within the United Nations system. Our Strategy strongly reflects the UN's normative foundations and operational processes. We ensure our research is relevant and valuable by listening and responding to global research and policy-making communities. In line with our mandate, our research focuses on social development policy. We engage with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that ideas, knowledge and evidence inform processes of change—bridging academia, policy and decision makers, practitioners and advocates around the world.

Implementation and funding

UNRISD receives no funding from the regular budget of the United Nations. The Institute must fully mobilize all necessary financial resources to implement the ambitious Strategy set out in this document. Within the framework of this Strategy, UNRISD remains flexible and responsive to changing contexts, emerging priorities, and specific demands for research from United Nations entities and other key users and funders. Our activities and research may be modified, subject to discussion and approval by the UNRISD Board.

How UNRISD defines social development

Social development is a process of transformation that improves human well-being within the natural boundaries of the planet. It fosters equitable social relations that conform to principles of democratic governance and justice. It includes good health and education, as well as access to resources, goods and services that support decent living—characterized by dignity, security and being recognized as part of a community, as well as political agency, participation and representation.

Transformative social development involves change to social structures, institutions, individuals and their relations. Such development includes the eradication of inequalities related to class, race, ethnicity, religion, location, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics—forms of stratification that lock current and future generations into disadvantage or limit their agency. Transformative social development also supports the transition to sustainable production and consumption—and to economic structures that enhance environmentally sound productivity with equitable distribution of its benefits.

Transformative social development is ultimately a political project. At its core are power configurations at household, local, national, regional and global levels. Social change necessarily involves contestation and negotiation. It requires redistributing resources and entitlements, and improving the institutions of governance that manage collective concerns.

A Deeply Challenging Global Development Context with Inequalities Centre-Stage

Humanity is facing a perfect storm of densely interlinked challenges that threaten its well-being and even its very existence. Inequalities—structural and systemic—have been building for decades. Global warming, which we were aware of half a century ago, has become an existential threat as a result of our inaction and will drive further wedges between rich and poor. And rapid technological change is altering economic and development relationships between countries, within countries and communities, and between capital and labour. Now, on the heels of a fragile recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis, the world is facing a global pandemic that has both exposed and exacerbated inequalities in many dimensions, as well as associated vulnerabilities and forms of discrimination. These factors together are shaping the forbidding context for our work over the coming five years.

Inequality remains our central and strategic focus

Inequality—in its various forms—is the central focus of the UNRISD Strategy. Inequalities are at the heart of today's greatest development challenges, obstructing poverty reduction, the realization of human rights and sustainable development. Elite capture of economic and political power both catalyses and reinforces inequalities in a vicious cycle, undermining social, environmental and economic sustainability, and fuelling poverty,

insecurity, crime, discrimination and xenophobia. Inequalities are structurally embedded and in many cases are growing. Shocks such as Covid-19 will widen fractures. Economic growth in some large emerging economies has led to the rapid reduction of poverty. But the global story, if these large emerging economies are excluded, is one of continued divergence. Moreover, inequalities within countries at all income levels have grown in the last 40 years. Progress towards human rights and economic well-being for all groups remains depressingly slow. In some arenas the little progress that has been made—including on gender equality—is contested and risks being reversed.

Wealth is trickling up to those already rich

Economic incentives at all levels—global, country, firm and individual—have become more focused on wealth extraction than on longer-term investment in strengthened systems for the future. This has been further exacerbated by an unequal distribution of economic value—across countries, within societies, and across generations. Many countries have run down their public institutions and services over a decade of austerity and recovery from the 2008 crisis. Rewards in the private sector have continued to flow in abundance to those who own or allocate capital, and away from workers in essential roles who face increasing precarity in their conditions of employment. Economic policies, often reinforced by forms of discrimination, are accentuating vulnerabilities for many people.

Covid-19 casts a long shadow

The pandemic casts a long shadow across the period of this UNRISD five-year Strategy, and its economic and social impacts will stretch well beyond. Covid-19 has shone a harsh light on inadequacies in essential organizations and services, and thrown into sharp relief systemic failures in economic governance. Unemployment in many countries has risen as businesses have closed. Government budgets are under pressure because of high pandemic-response spending and lower tax receipts. Debt burdens are high in some countries, raising the prospect of future phases of austerity. The conditions for economic and social development—and the realization of the 2030 Agenda—are being undermined.

The pandemic has revealed fractures and inequalities across all levels of societies. All people have been affected, but those people and families around the world who were already struggling have been made even more vulnerable. Poorer countries have been unable to mitigate the economic and social impacts of lockdown measures, or secure protective equipment and vaccines.

As societies struggle with environmental degradation, demographic change, and the fast pace of technological development, the pandemic has revealed deep structural challenges and a wider malaise in public policy and in the credibility of institutions. Faced with large, urgent shocks, societies have shown that they lack resilience, or their resilience has been exhausted. As a result many are unprepared for the host of challenges that confront humanity: conflict and displacement, new disease vectors, climate disruptions, extreme weather events and natural disasters.

Technology spurs new opportunities as well as threats

Technology has moved on rapidly since UNRISD developed its last institutional strategy. New digital technologies have opened up more opportunities for service delivery and human progress. Some countries in the global South have been able to test and implement new models for social protection, financial services and the provision of education and health services. At the same time, access to technologies and their benefits is still very unequal. New digital divides risk leaving unskilled workers in poorer countries behind, many of whom are women. Algorithms have been shown to amplify polarization, discrimination and exclusion. And the darker side of social media has allowed the pursuit of nationalist agendas through (dis)information campaigns and the subversion of democratic processes.

Twin climate and environmental crises

Like a tsunami on the horizon speeding to shore, the adverse effects of global warming and irreversible environmental destruction are growing inexorably bigger. Despite some positive signals from governments and businesses, we are failing to decarbonize our economies fast enough or deeply enough. We have not yet recognized that humans

are one inherent part of nature, and not separate from it. The repercussions of inaction threaten all aspects of peace, stability and well-being on the planet. In taking action—as we must—to halt, and begin reversing, climate change and environmental destruction, those least responsible must not bear the costs. Any sustainable transition to a low-carbon economy must be a “just transition”.

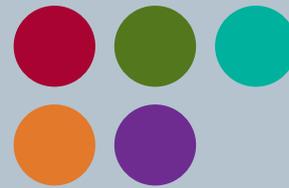
Cooperation for shared well-being

Globalization has woven countries together and reinforced their interdependence, albeit in a very unequal way. The economic productivity and competitiveness challenges that many developing countries face have not been overcome. And yet, economic shocks and shifting political gravity have turned some industrialized countries towards nationalist policies. This has in turn disrupted cooperation on trade, migration, and even pandemic management, and has undermined policies designed to safeguard the planet. As a result, societies have been impeded in responding to both new and old challenges for the benefit of all; this at a time when countries with fewer resources and less capacity urgently need solidarity and support, and, ultimately, structurally fairer outcomes of globalization. It is of great importance that the current pandemic does not further amplify inward-looking policies, but instead reinforces cooperation for the benefit of all.

Building inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies

How can we respond? The strategic thrust of our work at UNRISD, centred on inequalities, is to support progressive forces advocating for more inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies, and in particular those innovative initiatives building towards a new eco-social contract for the 21st century. To this end, we will continue to co-produce with our networks evidence-based knowledge about what drives inequalities, as well as their impacts. Our research will continue to dissect those obstacles that prevent policy and investment from redressing inequalities and realizing the objective of “leaving no one behind”. We will interrogate and communicate the policy and practice implications, and make use of diverse uptake pathways, ensuring that our research reaches those who can use it to effect progressive change.

Research Programmes



UNRISD's research programmes for 2021–2025 have been informed by consultations with our broad network of stakeholders, including researchers and practitioners from all regions of the world. They build on research conducted under the previous institutional strategy (2016–2020), and have evolved in light of a changing global development context and new priorities. All programmes seek to support transformative change to advance social and sustainable development, with particular attention paid to the importance of inclusion, institutions, intersections and innovations. Tackling the root causes of inequalities is a cross-cutting objective of all the research programmes. Furthermore, each programme in its own way brings insight to the development of a new eco-social contract—represented in societal compacts that are inclusive of all people, guarantee their participation, and advance social development within the natural boundaries provided by our planet and its ecosystems. All programmes, finally, will be driven by perspectives from the global South, seeking innovations that replace business as usual, and grounded in an understanding of the politics of change.

Framework for UNRISD research—understanding transformative change

Four considerations—Inclusion, Institutions, Intersections and Innovations—inform our understanding of social development as being a process of transformative change in social and power relations, structures and institutions, and in individuals themselves, that leads to the realization of human rights and economic well-being.

Inclusion

What are the obstacles to inclusion and ways to overcome exclusion?

Institutions

What institutions, policies and pathways can lead to equitable, inclusive and sustainable development?

Intersections

How are positive synergies harnessed and trade-offs minimized between different issues, policies and interventions?

Innovations

What innovations and practices have the potential to generate progressive social change?

Note: For further elaboration of the four “I”s, see www.unrisd.org/unrisd-strategy-2016-2020

Transformative change—sustainable economies, climate justice, reduced inequalities in power and wealth

Transformative change tackles the root causes of poverty, inequality and environmental destruction. It means changes to social structures and relations, to the power of elites and to those patterns of stratification—class, race, ethnicity, religion, location or SOGIESC—that are locking many millions into disadvantage and deprivation. It requires transformative social policies that are universal and rights-based, and changes to economic structures so as to favour employment-intensive growth patterns and a fairer distribution of the benefits of economic activity. It necessarily includes shifting to sustainable production and consumption patterns that halt environmental destruction.

Our approach to transformative change is grounded in the vision and aspiration set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Front and centre are the goals of sustainable economies, environmental and climate justice, and reduced inequalities in power and wealth. To that end our work scrutinizes the many issues associated with aspirations, values and norms, institutions and policies, actors and collective actions which shape social, economic, environmental and political outcomes.

UNRISD research mirrors the ambition set out in the 2030 Agenda, charting pathways forward for transformative change over the coming decade in the following key, interlinked areas:

- the normative cornerstones for greater sustainability and equity;
- the processes that help overcome unsustainable and inequitable practices;
- the empowerment of marginalized, disadvantaged groups;
- the fight for gender equality;
- the rebalancing of elite-centred power structures;
- the establishment of inclusive and equitable multi-stakeholder partnerships;
- the proliferation of participatory democracy to multiple levels of governance; and
- innovative policy, grounded in social justice and environmental sustainability, forged through inclusive political processes, equitable forms of partnership, multilevel governance reforms, and increased state capacity.



Transformative Social Policy Programme

UNRISD research and policy analysis are at the forefront of progressive international development thinking that reasserts the centrality of social policy in development strategies. For nearly six decades, issues such as rights and empowerment, the values of the UN Charter, the functions of social policy in a development context, the challenges of inclusive and sustainable growth, and the politics of social policy making have been at the heart of the Institute’s inquiry. Social policy now gets more attention in international development discourse,

with the spread of social assistance programmes, as well as global commitments to social protection and universal health care in the Sustainable Development Goals. UNRISD provides the kinds of evidence and analysis

that are urgently needed to deliver the vision of transformation promised in the 2030 Agenda and to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic in a way that is inclusive and sustainable for all.

At UNRISD, we define social policy as public interventions that guarantee adequate and secure living standards that enable all people to strive towards and develop their full potential. Social policy comprises basic social services such as education and health, cash transfers such as pensions, child benefits or social assistance, and labour market policies. In a development context, social policy plays key roles for production, reproduction, redistribution, and protection against life and market risks. In addition, it can foster social cohesion and the enjoyment of rights—this is what UNRISD calls Transformative Social Policy (TSP). TSP is human rights-based, entails democratic decision making, and works in tandem with economic policies to address root causes of poverty, inequality and practices which are unsustainable.

Crises and rapid change are posing significant challenges for social policy

Humanity is facing a range of global crises as well as processes of rapid change—in environmental degradation, demography and technology. Violent conflict, unrest and societal fracture are symptoms of a broken social contract. This context presents a profound challenge for social policy to adapt to and address. The persistence of extreme poverty points to the inadequacy of residual approaches to social policy, rather than universal approaches proven to have better social outcomes, administrative efficiency and political support. Inequality continues to grow, itself increasing poverty, damaging well-being, and threatening social cohesion and solidarity. The sustainable and equitable financing of social policy has been undermined by jobless growth, austerity, illicit financial flows and tax evasion.

Inequality is rising, the social contract is unravelling

Increasing inequality and precarity have characterized the last four decades of regressive neoliberal economic policies. As power and resources concentrate in the hands of elites seeking to entrench the status quo, inequalities within and between countries have grown. These have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has left many people struggling both to stay safe and to meet their most basic needs. Where state provision has been weakened and public services dismantled, and where social policy targets exclusively the extreme poor, the social contract—either previously in place or incipient—is unravelling. Global solidarity and the trust of citizens in their governments are diminishing.

Understanding the drivers of inequality—and how they can be reversed

This is the deeply challenging context facing social policy. The Transformative Social Policy programme will combine work on policy approaches that are innovative and transformative, with institutional and political analyses at local, national, regional and global levels. Our aim is to formulate a better understanding of the drivers of

inequality and its attendant fractures—economic, social, cultural and political—and to examine ways to overcome them. We will apply a political economy lens to unpack the role of policy decision makers, civil society, the private sector and donors, with a special focus on elites. We will explore the transformative potential of progressive alliances and social movements in addressing inequalities.

Focus and questions

Work in the Transformative Social Policy Programme will focus on how social policy can address multiple and overlapping inequalities—of class, age, disability, location, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), religion, migration or refugee status. As part of this it will explore how institutions and norms shape policy design, implementation and outcomes.

It will give attention to understanding, analysing and engaging with processes of policy change around the following types of questions:

- What are the drivers and actors in social policy reforms, expansion or retrenchment in different contexts, including in the global South?
- What role do social policies play in overcoming (or reinforcing) inequalities, poverty and social exclusion, and in promoting inclusive development paths?
- What is the impact of migration on inequalities and social development, and of South-South migration in particular, and what role does social policy play in these contexts?
- What are the pathways for building towards a new eco-social contract—one that delivers universal social rights and environmental justice, and is built upon sustainable national and global resource bargains?



Gender Justice and Development Programme

UNRISD research has both led and continually challenged the field of gender and development, contributing to feminist scholarship and activism, and bringing evidence to bear on the practice of development. For more than three decades, the Institute has explored the gendered power relations found at the centre of institutions and

policies, political and social life, and how such dynamics shape unjust gender outcomes. With the Covid-19 pandemic shining a stark light on inequalities across societies, some fundamental and longstanding questions have again been pushed to the fore: who works on what, who cares for whom and in exchange for what, and how does culture determine the roles, relations, aspirations and satisfaction of human beings. Advances towards a more equal distribution of labour, care, power and well-being have been made in the past, but gender justice has proven more elusive and equality gains can be lost very quickly.

The Gender Justice and Development Programme will contribute original thinking, analysis and evidence that can be used to reduce gender-based inequalities and leave no one behind. Leaving no one behind entails giving substance to the concept of gender justice through fair treatment for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Gender justice is located in wider debates around social justice—a perennial concern of global South feminists. It is a notion that shifts the emphasis towards transformation of the existing development agenda from a feminist point of view. This approach raises the importance of gendered biases embedded in culture and institutions that limit women’s capacities to profit from equal opportunities or even “unequal” special access privileges.

UNRISD research aims to contribute to understanding and addressing such cultural, economic, social and political barriers to the kinds of transformations—in ways of living and in institutions—that will be necessary not only for equality or empowerment, but for justice.

Defying a concerted challenge to gender equality

From subtle forms of patriarchal control of women in the home, to overt displays of collective violence against women in public spaces, including femicide, the steady pushback—in some cases, intensifying backlash—against hard-won gains in women’s rights and equality is a growing source of concern. These trends reflect efforts to reinforce or revert to traditional norms of masculinity and femininity, which in turn shape institutions that produce and reproduce gender injustice. The Gender Justice and Development Programme will explore anti-genderism and resurgent threats to women’s rights. Understanding the gendered power dynamics within social structures, as well as the obstacles these pose to women’s agency, is crucial if we are to contest what amounts to a challenge to the overarching project of gender equality itself.

Technological change—intensifying the gendered division of labour?

The unequal distribution of economic resources and opportunities is an obstacle to women’s equality and gender justice around the world. Today’s rapid pace of technological change is giving rise to changes in productivity and employment, with new technologies opening up women’s access to markets and resources, as well as political participation. Yet technology is also displacing employment in key sectors of importance to women—with consequences such as economic exclusion and gender inequality. One area that can be expected to avoid displacement, however, is care work. While such work can be done by men and women, as other sectors become more technology intensive it is possible that women will be forced once again to take on jobs identified with the bodily and emotional sphere, increasing the gendered division of labour.

Redefining a feminist environmental policy as a social and political project

Much of the available research in the area of climate change, not to mention operational or policy approaches, is gender blind. Yet the scale of social change and innovation needed to meet the challenges of unsustainable resource use and environmental destruction is daunting, and will not be overcome without gender justice. The same is true for the design of a new eco-social contract. A

reconfigured feminist environmental policy should, for example, catalyse processes of transformation by integrating measures that protect vital ecosystems and enhance gender justice in climate change adaptation. Redefining a feminist environmental policy as a social and political project also requires reshaping how impacts are measured in relation to planetary resources and social systems. By generating evidence on new forms of feminist participation and alternative models of sustainability within a new global political economy that challenges the gender division of labour, the programme will contribute to the broader project of a new eco-social contract.

Focus and questions

Through a deeper understanding of the economic, social, cultural and political barriers that stand in the way of transforming ways of life and institutions, the research will contribute original thinking, insightful analysis and relevant evidence that can be used to reduce gender-based inequalities and injustice, and leave no one behind.

Work in the Gender Justice and Development Programme will focus on understanding, analysing and engaging with processes of policy change around the following types of questions.

- How is the phenomenon of gender backlash or anti-genderism seen in different parts of the global South? Where, why and how is it playing out in different places and for different categories of people?
- How will ongoing innovation and technological shifts affect women’s work? Which occupations will become “feminized” or “defeminized”? What can be done to counter the strong gender biases embedded in new technologies, and their consequences for employment, social services and social protection delivery?
- What would a feminist environmental policy look like? How could it be designed and implemented? How can gender research and feminist perspectives support the coalitions and collaborations working to deliver social, economic and environmental justice for communities across the globe?



Alternative Economies for Transformation Programme

Questioning of conventional wisdom and mainstream approaches has been a hallmark of the Institute's research since it was established, driven by the imperative of constructing better alternatives. These have ranged from alternative theoretical frameworks, institutional arrangements and policy recommendations, to alternative definitions, methods and indicators for measuring the development and progress of societies and

economies. The 2030 Agenda embodies a hopeful consensus around the vision of a sustainable future. But its promise will not be achieved with business as usual. In this context there is a vital need for critical research that can take on politically sensitive topics, elevate perspectives that challenge the status quo, and propose alternatives that shape and drive politics of transformation.

The ideas, institutions and actions that gave credibility to the modern ideals of development have been called into question by concurrent and multiple crises. Climate change, escalating inequalities and the Covid-19 pandemic are exerting punishing tolls on individuals, societies and

economies across the world. With greater awareness that modern-day capitalism is a main cause of these crises comes a heightened appetite for alternative approaches that can turn the tide towards a more sustainable future. Once positioned on the radical fringe or considered not to have systemic or structural significance, alternative ways of thinking, living and organizing—including alternative economies—are attracting more attention within mainstream knowledge and policy circles. The Alternative Economies for Transformation Programme will explore alternative economic models that are viable, egalitarian and ecologically sound, and it will identify innovative ways to measure how sustainable they are, in terms of environmental, social and governance performance. It will consider their underlying norms and values, how they are organized, their linkages with collective action and progressive politics, and their place in reducing inequalities and building towards a new eco-social compact.

Alternative economies—prioritizing society and environment over profits

“Things can’t go on as they have before”, a sentiment that has spread and deepened since the turn of the millennium, is embodied in the need for transformative change expressed in the 2030 Agenda. There is growing recognition that innovative approaches—including alternative ways of organizing economic activities—are essential for delivering on the Agenda’s commitments and achieving the SDGs. Alternative economies that operate at the intersection of economic, social, environmental, governance and human rights dimensions aim to foster complementarities and interlinkages between them and trigger advances on multiple fronts. They challenge the conventional, profit-oriented business model by rebalancing power asymmetries and transforming structures that reinforce poverty, inequality and social exclusion. In doing so, alternative models can transform unsustainable economic growth, profit distribution and value appropriation while promoting progressive politics and collective action. This in turn can empower vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged people.

Putting inclusive development centre stage—social and solidarity economy

Development stakeholders are increasingly looking to innovative or alternative institutions, policies and practices that promote sustainable production, exchange and consumption. The social and solidarity economy (SSE) is one such approach, an example of an alternative economy that prioritizes social (and often environmental) objectives over profits, and is based on values of cooperation, self-help, democratic self-management, human rights, ethics and justice. Within such an economy, sustainable and inclusive development are foundational values; and reduced inequality, enhanced solidarity and participatory democracy are outcomes. SSE is closely associated with movements, institutions and policies that break the vicious circle of unsustainable growth and inequality. Its impact has been particularly marked in contexts of crisis, including the 2008 global

financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. The values and movements underlying SSE will be indispensable elements constituting a new eco-social contract.

Focus and questions

The programme will identify and explore institutions, policies and practices that characterize alternative ways of organizing economic and social relations and activities—as well as actors, including rights-based social movements and networks, that advocate for transformative change.

Work in the Alternative Economies for Transformation Programme will focus on understanding, analysing and engaging with processes of policy change around the following types of questions:

- What makes an “alternative economy”? How do alternative economies counter the drivers of business as usual or a status quo which reinforces unsustainable growth patterns, inequality and social exclusion, and environmental degradation?
- What are the politics, governance arrangements, ethics and forms of collective action that foster alternative economies, and what are the dynamics at play?
- How do alternative economies empower the vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalized both economically and politically?
- How can business and enterprise performance associated with inclusion, sustainability and empowerment be measured and assessed?
- How can viable alternative economies be scaled up and mainstreamed?



Environmental and Climate Justice Programme

UNRISD consistently emphasizes the need to integrate social, environmental and economic dimensions in order to analyse development processes and promote transformative outcomes. Our research examines the wide range of factors that shape the interactions between people and nature and which lead to environmental stress, including the role of social norms, institutions and actors, power asymmetries and technology. It explores the social consequences of processes of economic and environmental change, and the ways people and communities organize and mobilize

collectively to enhance their well-being while managing or protecting their natural resources.

Environmental disruption threatens human well-being and prosperity, already under attack in many countries from 10 years of austerity following the global financial and economic crisis, and intensified over the past year by the Covid-19 pandemic. But environmental and climate change are

political and rights issues as well, that need to be assessed and addressed in terms of distributive and procedural justice. The Environmental and Climate Justice Programme focuses on understanding, analysing and engaging with processes of policy change that can tackle unsustainable practices, climate change and inequalities. The work entails attention to the interplay between social, environmental and economic issues at different levels of governance in support of sustainable, low-carbon development. UNRISD work in this area aims to inform and promote policies that decarbonize the economy and protect people from the unavoidable impacts of climate change while addressing existing inequalities and questions of justice.

Dismantling injustices

Beyond the fundamental damage caused to our ecosystems and biodiversity, the climate crisis is one of social and environmental injustice: those who are least responsible for it face the greatest impacts and have the fewest resources to cope with it. Countries that developed on the back of unsustainable resource use, including through colonization and extraction from the global South, must use their capacity and resources to act now. The Environmental and Climate Justice Programme will analyse how injustices in these

areas are produced and manifested at all levels of governance, and examine their interlinkages with inequality and discrimination (including those based on gender and race). It will identify entry points for transformative change in policy and practice that tackle the root causes of climate and environmental injustices.

Making climate policy less unequal

Climate and environmental injustices are compounded by the limited ability of poorer countries to influence climate policy making, which in turn results in further disadvantage as policy responses to climate change exacerbate existing inequalities. Today's global political economy prioritizes unsustainable growth and profit over justice and equality, and over what our planet can sustain—triggering many interlinked social and environmental crises. Research within the programme will identify goal conflicts and contradictions among development objectives and policies, providing evidence that can help address them. The programme will not only generate original knowledge; it will also identify progressive, cutting-edge perspectives that are currently under-represented in the climate debate, and bring this knowledge into the international conversation on climate and development.

Business-as-usual responses are failing

Business-as-usual policies are not commensurate with the size of the task of averting the full effects of the climate crisis—they are not on track to deliver the rapid decarbonization that is needed, and are failing to tackle environmental and climate injustices disproportionately impacting poor people, indigenous peoples, and minorities. Transformative approaches to policy making will be necessary—approaches that address power structures and systems of oppression and exploitation. The Environmental and Climate Justice Programme will provide a platform for marginalized, neglected viewpoints and voices that challenge mainstream and business-as-usual policy solutions.

Decarbonizing the economy and protecting people

The programme approaches climate and environmental change as rights issues that need to be addressed in terms of their distributive

and procedural justice outcomes. It employs an intersectional lens, focusing on those often excluded from policy decision-making processes—because of poverty, gender, age, precarious employment, limited workplace rights, disability, ethnicity, or indigenous status. The programme pays particular attention to policies that aim simultaneously to decarbonize the economy, protect people from the impacts of climate change, and address inequalities and injustice.



Focus and questions

The programme will show how social, climate and environmental justice are interlinked and how they can together contribute to rights-based development, equality and a new eco-social contract. It will contribute to a deeper understanding of climate and environmental injustices, and how they can be overcome through transdisciplinary and integrated approaches.

Research in the Environmental and Climate Justice Programme will focus on understanding, analysing and engaging with processes of policy change around the following types of questions:

- How are social, climate and environmental justice interlinked, and how do they contribute to rights-based development, equality and the creation of a new eco-social contract?
- How are environmental and climate injustices produced and manifested at all levels of governance, and how do they interact with inequalities and discrimination (including those based on gender and race)?
- What are the conflicts, contradictions and trade-offs between different social, economic and environmental objectives, and how can they be addressed?
- What are the entry points for transformative change in policy and practice that tackle the root causes of climate and environmental injustices?



Translating Research into Policy and Practice—Bonn Programme

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embodies ambitious commitments to transformative change by national governments and their development partners in the UN system, civil society and the private sector. Making such change requires profound shifts in development thinking, greater policy coherence and highly effective partnerships. Interdisciplinary research is a vital ingredient in the recipe for successful implementation of the SDGs, but an important challenge remains: translating that research into integrated policies and practice. UNRISD's Bonn Programme works to build the knowledge and capacity needed to address the social, economic, cultural, political and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

UNRISD established its Bonn Programme on Integrating Knowledge and Capacity Development for the SDGs to create new interagency collaborations and enhance synergies between research and learning. The programme aim is to increase the uptake of evidence-based analysis and knowledge production on the social dimensions of sustainable development, and contribute to high-quality, relevant training and capacity development.

Programme promise and objectives

By fostering interagency collaborations and synergies, the programme improves the efficiency and coherence with which we deliver our mandates. It seeks to catalyse integrated perspectives, new working modalities and innovative strategies that anticipate knowledge gaps and upcoming skills needs. The programme is led out of an UNRISD office in Bonn, which benefits from—and reinforces—Bonn's status as a centre for international cooperation, sustainable development and innovation.

The Bonn Programme has four main objectives.

- Strengthen the Bonn ecosystem for sustainable development by adopting an integrated approach to knowledge and skills development—where research feeds into training and capacity building and is informed by their needs.

- Build a joint research-capacity strategy—through identifying knowledge gaps and implementing research accordingly.
- Improve evidence-based SDG implementation and research uptake by UN and other development partners—through collaborating with partners in Bonn and around the world.
- Build a network on a new eco-social contract that connects policy makers, researchers and activists across the globe.

Climate and inequalities crises demand a new eco-social contract

The Bonn Programme will create partnerships and work with others on the links between climate change and inequality, between financial crises, poverty and environmental sustainability, and the need for a new eco-social contract. It will build a new network that convenes policy makers, researchers and progressive movements to build the evidence and support for a more equitable and inclusive ecological and social contract fit for the 21st century and beyond. Importantly the programme will prioritize voices from the global South and from marginalized groups. It will integrate traditional knowledge, including that of indigenous peoples and minorities, through employing rights-based and gender-inclusive approaches. These activities will strengthen further UNRISD's overall aim of strengthening evidence-informed implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Focus and activities

The Bonn Programme aims to increase the uptake of evidence-based analysis and knowledge production on the social dimensions of sustainable development, and contribute to high-quality, relevant training and capacity development, through:

- Identifying knowledge-capacity gaps regarding the social dimensions of sustainable development and linking these to UNRISD research.
- Supporting integrated approaches to SDG implementation with interdisciplinary evidence and knowledge products.

Eco-social contract—vital to deliver on the SDGs

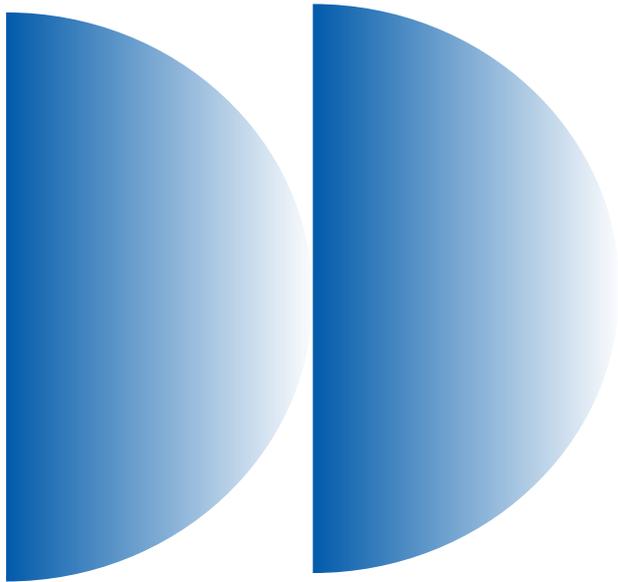
The 20th century social contract—an implicit bargain between economic imperatives of growth and productivity, and social imperatives of redistribution and social protection—has broken down and cannot sustain the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda. The breakdown of the social contract manifests itself in multiple global crises and the deep divisions in our societies. For the 21st century, UNRISD believes, the contract is in need of a fundamental overhaul. First, it must ensure human rights for all—importantly, this means bringing in those not fully benefitting from previous social contracts, such as women, informal workers and migrants. Second, it must ensure larger freedom for all in a fast-changing world, including security and protection as new challenges emerge. Third, it must spur the transformation of economies and societies to halt climate change and environmental destruction.

A 21st century eco-social contract, in terms of process and outcome, will reflect a reconfiguration of relationships that have become sharply imbalanced—those between state and citizen, between capital and labour, between the global North and the global South, between humans and the natural environment. It will be based on rebalancing hegemonic gender roles, resetting dominant discourses, and uprooting discriminatory relations grounded in patriarchy and cultural norms. It will help define rights and obligations, promote greater equality and solidarity, and provide legitimacy, credibility, trust and buy-in for reforms underpinning transformative change. It will serve to reduce inequalities in all their dimensions, help us to recover from Covid-19 in an equitable and transformative way, and improve our resilience for shocks and crises yet to come.

Building a new eco-social contract is a way to give substance to the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It will be better understood and have more traction if grounded in broad participation, dialogue and consensus building, while containing clear accountability mechanisms. It will need to reflect the realities of people's lives. It will be constructed—and indeed, is already being constructed—incrementally, step by step across sectors and issues, and at different levels, from local to national, regional and global.

A 21st century eco-social contract must be fostered through a raft of changes to policies and institutions so that they are democratic, inclusive and promote gender and environmental justice, coupled with alternative economies and transformative social policies.

Pathways to Transformation: Evidence-Based Research to Meet Policy Needs



How can we ensure that innovative, transformative approaches, policies and practices are designed and implemented in a meaningful way? This is our central challenge as we pursue the 2030 Agenda. While a “transformation” narrative is now part of the SDG discourse, processes of change are often not specific and explicit. Intended policy change may not be applied in practice, or may translate into cosmetic reform. Policy initiatives in one field may be contradicted by those in another. Progressive ideas and institutional reforms may be co-opted by special interests or superficially attached to business-as-usual approaches. Changes in social norms are likely to encounter strong resistance. Promising social or governance innovations may be reversed or not sustained.

UNRISD’s policy-relevant research and evidence-based analysis helps identify barriers to sustainable development, and proposes ideas on how to attain

in reality what is set out on paper. In this way, UNRISD helps move forward the collective efforts of the development community to design and implement transformative solutions to increasingly complex, interconnected challenges.

UNRISD uses five distinct, related mechanisms in contributing to processes of transformative social change.

Research that helps understand the politics of change

Through research we generate knowledge on transformation that helps the global development community enact transformative social change. Social development problems are embedded in complex systems. Addressing them requires that we understand the politics of change. Our research unlocks an understanding of context-specific power dynamics, how decisions are informed and made, how coalitions are formed, and the capacity and incentives of institutions.

The UNRISD integrated approach encourages thinking outside of disciplinary silos and operates at intersections where the most innovative solutions to complex global development challenges are often imagined. We also “scan the horizon”: our expert knowledge of development challenges and debates means we can identify emerging or neglected topics and prioritize research in these areas, shifting policy agendas towards more progressive outcomes.



Collaboration with global networks to co-design research and co-produce evidence

The UNRISD research process itself contributes to transformation. We collaborate with researchers and institutions from the global South in selecting research areas, methodologies and policy-relevant questions. We build interdisciplinary networks that co-produce knowledge, share lessons and engage with partners to design, implement and deliver research. In working this way, we seek to “decolonize” research and ensure that it is led by the knowledge and perspectives of our partners. We commit to the further evolution and strengthening of this approach over the coming years.

Transdisciplinary engagement throughout the research process

The transdisciplinary engagement with policy actors, practitioners and advocates that characterizes our approach helps us to build synergies with stakeholders, institutions and processes. This ensures that research is relevant, evidence is robust, and findings are tailored for uptake by the development community in effecting change.

Unique UN position enables policy engagement in UN and in national processes

As an autonomous research institute within the UN system, UNRISD offers ideal opportunities for policy engagement in the UN and in national policy debates. We design and undertake our research explicitly to enable sustained interactions with potential users, while our work remains fully independent and guided by standards of academic rigour.

Evidence-based research used by global development community

Our research provides evidence that can be taken up and used by development actors to inform policy and practice, to assess the benefits and shortcomings of varied approaches—and to set priorities, make policy choices, and support their practical implementation.

Research evolution over six decades

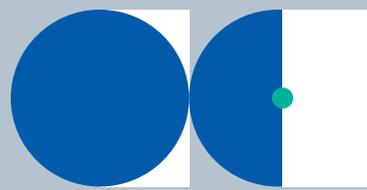
UNRISD has researched and analysed the social dimensions of inclusive, sustainable development for nearly six decades, building unique and powerful assets:

- Substantial body of evidence and original analysis on the relationship between social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of development.
- Unique position within the United Nations leveraged with research and academic networks in North and South; an interface on social development issues.
- Track record of raising visibility within the United Nations of neglected issues through transdisciplinary collaboration.
- Global networks of policy makers, academics, advocates and practitioners; a respected, effective, inclusive convener.
- Reputation for strengthening the capacity of researchers in the global South through an approach of co-creation and mutual learning.
- Innovative communications, ensuring our work reaches and is informed by those who are driving social change.
- Research credibility combined with extensive networks, generating significant, long-term transformative impacts.

UNRISD: Thought leader, agenda setter across the decades

- 1960s** Pioneering Social and Human Indicators of Development
- 1970s** Exploring the Social and Political Dynamics of Modernization
- 1980s** Promoting a Holistic and Multidisciplinary Approach to Social Development
- 1990s** Anticipating the Social Effects of Globalization
- 2000s** Taking Global Responsibility for Social Development
- 2010s** From Crisis and Uncertainty to the Promise of Transformative Change
- 2020s** Overcoming Inequalities: Towards a New Eco-Social Contract

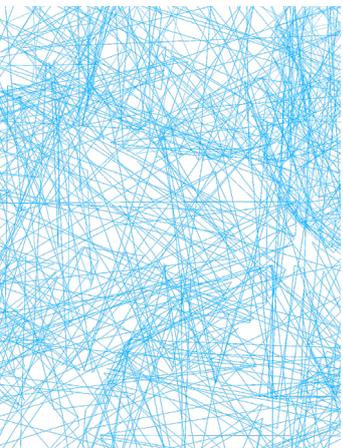
Communicating Research for Social Change



Communications is integral to UNRISD’s effort to ensure our research gets to those who matter—the global development community that can shape policy and practice. Our Communications Strategy, coupled with our network-based activities and advisory work, is key to achieving this aim.

Our target audience—the global development community

UNRISD engages with diverse target audiences who contribute to progressive, transformative change in the field of social development. They include policy decision makers at the global, national and local levels; civil society advocates and activists; researchers in academia, civil society and public service; and donor organizations.



Multi-channel strategy—written products, digital media, events

Our Communications Strategy comprises products and services that present research findings, translate them into clear, concise policy messages, and deliver them via a variety of channels. Our written products include research reports as well as policy briefs and think-pieces that highlight topical links between

current affairs and research. Multimedia and digital-first content, including an active presence on social platforms, are vital in enabling us to reach a range of audiences, anticipating and responding to changes in the communications landscape and impact pathways. Videos and podcasts feature strongly in UNRISD’s portfolio. Events are also crucial in bringing research findings to our audiences, fostering exchange, dialogue and debate. UNRISD delivers a range of events, from specialized seminars to widely accessible webinars to large international multi-stakeholder conferences.

The UNRISD website is our prime communications channel, functioning importantly as an open access repository for decades of the Institute’s research. As we embark on the UNRISD Strategy 2021–2025 we will be designing and deploying a new and vibrant website, with maximum accessibility and engagement in our increasingly digital world.

Leveraging digital

UNRISD uses social media to engage with our audiences and promote our products—we are active on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and use YouTube and iTunes for our multimedia products. Channels also include a bimonthly eBulletin, curated biannual newsletters for audiences with specific information needs, and product-specific email alerts sent to 20,000 subscribers.

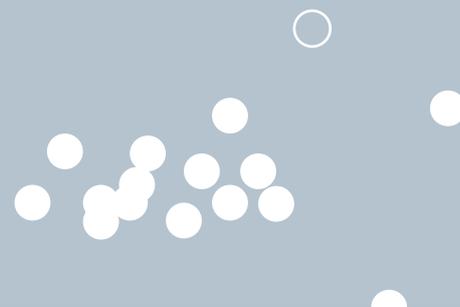
Unique access to UN development processes

UNRISD’s unique position as a research institute in the United Nations gives us access to important processes and channels for influence. These include meetings with senior leaders in the UN, academia, civil society and the private sector in seminars, conferences and UN expert groups. Connecting in the virtual sphere as a result of Covid-19 has enabled us to increase UNRISD’s reach. We pass on our research findings via knowledge brokers and information multipliers as well, while our extensive global networks reach policy, research, advocacy and practice communities—a direct channel for engagement at national and local levels.

Monitoring ensures ongoing improvement

We track and monitor our communications activities, adapting them based on experience in a cycle of continuous learning and improvement. A Results-Based Management Logframe comprises a set of indicators, based mostly on outputs and uptake, which are regularly monitored.

Expected Results



Through the implementation of the UNRISD Strategy 2021–2025, the Institute will contribute to a better understanding of and greater pluralism in transformative policies, practices and approaches to social development. UNRISD will contribute evidence, analysis, ideas and strategies—co-produced with its research networks and relevant stakeholders—that can shape development debates, policy formulation and practice. This evidence is aimed at reducing inequalities in various dimensions and fostering more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development outcomes through implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a special emphasis on low- and middle-income countries.

Specific objectives

- 1 Produce evidence, analysis, knowledge and ideas that put social dimensions at the centre of sustainable development**
 UNRISD will produce and convene high-quality, relevant research that addresses inequalities and the 2030 Agenda principle of “leaving no one behind” within the context of implementation of the SDGs.
- 2 Develop the capacity of Southern researchers to carry out interdisciplinary research on social dimensions of sustainable development issues**
 UNRISD will help develop the capacity of Southern researchers to carry out interdisciplinary research on the social dimensions of sustainable development issues through co-designing research methods and enquiries, a mutual learning approach, and a mentoring programme within the framework of UNRISD research projects.
- 3 Inform and influence the norms, policies and practices of sustainable development**
 UNRISD will make knowledge—pure research, research derived products, training and learning materials—available and accessible by communicating research in ways

that facilitate its uptake and use by key change actors in the policy, advocacy and practitioner communities at national, regional and international levels.

- 4 Convene and catalyse knowledge-sharing, interdisciplinary engagement and constructive debate**
 UNRISD will pursue its collaborative approach to engagement, providing spaces for mutual learning through seminars, workshops, panel discussions, conferences, and promoting under-represented viewpoints and alternative policy options.
- 5 Secure institutional and financial stability, predictability and sustainability through resource mobilization and effective governance**
 UNRISD will further enhance its efforts to broaden the Institute’s donor base, ensure sufficient reserves, and maintain and extend partnerships.

Tracking and assessing impact

A Results-Based Management Logframe sets out key indicators for monitoring and reporting achievements towards the objectives of the UNRISD Strategy 2021–2025. While this captures some quantifiable impacts of UNRISD’s work, our research has important qualitative impacts as well.

It translates into changes in academic and policy discourses; contributes to reframing debates; sheds light on concerns that were previously unrecognized; and generates evidence that can be used by policy makers and practitioners to effect change. The influence of research findings or ideas is mediated by the broader environment, and such knowledge becomes influential through its interaction with institutional forces and political actors. It can help political actors make sense of their goals and interests, and empower disadvantaged groups and lend legitimacy to their claims.

In order to gauge UNRISD’s impact at the qualitative level, regular feedback is sought from a wide range of stakeholders on the quality of specific outputs and activities, their use of research findings and materials, and influence or impact attributable to UNRISD work. Annual Reports to the UNRISD Board provide a comprehensive account of activities, engagement and influence during each year. Regular reporting to donors, and evaluations, also present a rich body of evidence for assessing the overall achievements of the Institute.

Activities and outputs

Through the UNRISD Strategy 2021–2025, we will continue to strengthen the mechanisms and modalities for delivering on UNRISD’s objectives through engaged research.

There are numerous opportunities to engage with the global development community, including the overarching 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which reaches its mid-point in 2023, responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and ongoing intergovernmental processes related to climate change, sustainable development and gender equality.

UNRISD will continue to explore partnerships across the United Nations system. We will continue to work closely with UNDESA, providing technical and expert inputs for their reports, and informing the work of ECOSOC and its various Commissions. The priority topics on the agenda of the Commission for Social Development—focused on rethinking inclusive social development—are highly relevant channels for UNRISD research. Focus areas of the Commission on the Status of Women—linking women’s empowerment and sustainable development, and the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls—provide important entry points for the Institute. The High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development remains a key focus for UNRISD engagement, as the main United Nations platform to review progress on sustainable development. As a member of the UN Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs, UNRISD ensures that its work is informed by, and informs, the highest-level coordination forums in the UN development system.

In addition to these programmed activities, which can be expanded and supplemented depending on resources, UNRISD has the flexibility to identify and respond rapidly and creatively to new challenges and opportunities. An online survey carried out by the Institute from April to June 2020, for example, gathered real-time insights on policy responses to address Covid-19, and resulted in the UNRISD report *Protecting and Supporting Vulnerable Groups Through the Covid-19 Crisis*.

UNRISD receives no funding from the regular budget of the United Nations, and must fully mobilize all the financial resources necessary to cover the institutional and staff costs required

to implement the UNRISD Strategy 2021–2025 outlined in this document. The underlying assumption in terms of delivering results, therefore, is that UNRISD will design and successfully implement a fundraising strategy that will diversify the Institute’s funding sources, and generate predictable, stable and increased revenues.

Approach, methods and data

UNRISD takes an interdisciplinary and comparative approach in its research, addressing questions that cut across sectors and domains in the field of social and economic development. It uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, and draws on analytical techniques from disciplines across the social sciences, including economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, law, political science and political economy. This approach ensures that collaboratively designed methodological and analytical frameworks are well suited to the questions and objectives of a particular research project. It is also well adapted to work that addresses complex social development and sustainability challenges at the science-policy interface.

Our work combines the highest standards of academic rigour and quality, recognized in independent evaluations and guaranteed through quality procedures such as peer review, with policy relevance and innovations generated through collaborations with research partners in the global South and elsewhere. The process of developing appropriate methodologies for each research project is also part of the co-construction of knowledge, contributing to the credibility and legitimacy of outputs, capacity development of Southern researchers, and mutual learning opportunities.

Through this methodological and conceptual pluralism, UNRISD generates analysis that contributes to the understanding of processes of social, environmental, economic, institutional and political change, filling gaps in the evidence base that policy makers need to design and implement more effective strategies for social and sustainable development.

The mixed methods approach employs a range of data, including:

- secondary data sets, for analysing, for example, longer-term trends, well-being or social development outcomes, gender or other inequalities, or coverage of social programmes;
- primary data, collected through small-scale surveys and/or various qualitative methods, as part of multi-country studies on particular topics; and
- data on institutions, policy processes, or the political economy of reform collected through interviews with key stakeholders and reviews of secondary literature and policy documents.

UNRISD’s cross-country comparative research projects generally consist of thematic or conceptual papers, country overview studies, and/or in-depth country case studies. Countries are selected for empirical work based on assessment of their:

- relevance to the topic of the research project;
- potential to meet the needs of both research and policy-making communities by filling an identified knowledge gap; and
- diversity with respect to region, development level and political regime, as relevant to the research questions.

Through comparative analysis of the evidence generated by strategically selected case studies, UNRISD research identifies patterns and processes of social change, and different policy approaches, which can then shape policy frameworks and inform the design of development policies at both national and global levels.



Consultation process

UNRISD undertook an extensive consultation process in 2020 to shape this Institutional Strategy, notwithstanding the limitations on physical meetings because of the pandemic. Through an online survey conducted from 8 July to 31 August 2020, strong support was given on the proposed framing of the Strategy around the challenge of inequalities, on the research programmes and their focus, and on how we undertake and communicate our activities. Further consultation meetings on the focus and approach of the individual programmes were held in the second half of 2020.

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