

Social Inclusion and the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda¹

The 1995 World Summit for Social Development outlined a vision of an inclusive society as a ‘society for all’ in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. Exclusion usually involves forms of economic exclusion (from labour market participation and adequate income, and thus evidenced by income poverty); but it also involves limits on the capacity of individuals or social groups to participate in society—whether due to economic, political or other social (e.g. cultural, religious, gender) factors. Thus social inclusion requires overcoming cultural and political barriers to participation at local, national or global levels.

Recent political developments underscore the contemporary relevance of social inclusion and have drawn public attention to the corrosive effects of deep inequalities in both the global North and the global South. There are many signs of social discontent, declining levels of trust in governments, and unrest in response to rising food prices, labour retrenchments, and draconian austerity measures (especially in European Union peripheries). While deep-seated and locally specific factors underpin the recent uprisings in various countries around the world, high rates of unemployment, precarious livelihoods and repressive state practices are common sources of discontent that feed popular unrest.

A focus on social inclusion—which highlights key issues such as poverty, unemployment, various forms of inequality, political participation and social cohesion—is, therefore, of direct relevance to the post-2015 agenda and the focus on sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development, as popularized at the first UN Earth Summit in 1992, places a triple emphasis on social, economic and environmental dimensions of development. Unsustainable development can be caused by not only environmental and disaster risks and inappropriate natural resources management, but also poverty, inequalities, discrimination and sociocultural exclusion, insecurity, human rights abuse and corruption. Inequitable growth, consumption patterns and unjust power relations can aggravate it further. Moreover, progress cannot be achieved or sustained amid conflicts and violence, which are often rooted in social and economic deprivations.

To ensure sustainable outcomes, on the other hand, requires the eradication of poverty in its multiple dimensions, equality of both opportunity and outcome, equity in the distribution of benefits and costs, social inclusion and non-discrimination that would allow full enjoyment of rights. Social policies can influence profound transformations across these economic, environmental and social domains—supporting economic productivity, raising human capital, reducing inequalities and sharing the burden of social reproduction—driving development outcomes in a more sustainable and inclusive direction.

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However, to be transformative, social policy cannot be limited to the residual role of assisting those at the margins of the economy, for example, through targeted transfers for poverty alleviation. Rather, integration among functions is necessary to provide security and opportunity for individuals across the life-course, to share the burdens and benefits of economic growth, and to redistribute the costs of care. Inadequate attention to these broader functions of social policy can threaten progress towards other development goals and, at the extreme, such failures may lead to violent conflict or generate further environmental degradation.

The global development agenda: From the MDGs to Sustainable Development

World leaders at the Millennium Summit agreed a number of key social development objectives, notably placing poverty reduction at the centre of the global development agenda. The resultant Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a clear demonstration that world leaders can come together to address the major challenges of our time—not only war and financial crisis, but also poverty. The MDGs acknowledge the multidimensional nature of poverty, going beyond simplistic measures of income to identify other elements that define the experience of being poor. Leaving aside the improbability that people in some parts of the world could even survive on \$1.25 a day—the current definition of extreme poverty—such income metrics fail to account for the vulnerabilities and indignities that plague the lives of many people in poor countries. Such concerns are reflected in the inclusion in the MDGs of other targets, such as alleviating hunger, promoting universal primary education, reducing maternal and child mortality, advancing gender equality and easing the burden of major diseases.

Despite the ambitious agenda set out by the MDGs, a number of critical issues and obstacles to overcoming poverty have not been addressed, including the mechanisms required to achieve the goals individually, or the synergies among them; the role of employment; growing levels of inequality; the often contradictory impact of certain macroeconomic policies; and the political and social relations that structure power and exclusion. Notably, many contemporary poverty reduction strategies represent a cautious approach to social development that have increasingly focused on “targeting the poor” to the neglect of key institutional, policy and political dimensions that may be both causes of poverty and inequality, and obstacles to their reduction. Evidence from countries that successfully reduced poverty over relatively short time frames shows that progress occurred principally through state-directed strategies combining economic development objectives with active social policies in ways that are mutually supportive. It also shows how poverty outcomes are shaped by complex interconnections of ideas, institutions, policies and practices across the social, economic and political spheres.

In the years since the Millennium Summit, climate change has radically shifted the focus of environmental concerns, while global financial meltdown and related crises of food and energy have extracted heavy social costs from those least able to bear them. The limits and contradictions of current development models have thus been sharply exposed. In this context, green economy has emerged as a prominent approach to addressing the human causes of global environmental and climate change through the transformation of the economy towards cleaner production and consumption processes. Widely defined as an approach “that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities” (UNEP 2011:2), the vision combines low carbon growth, resource efficiency, conservation, social inclusivity and poverty reduction,

apparently offering “win-win opportunities to improve the integration of economic development with environmental sustainability” (UNGA 2012:6, article 29).

As a policy goal, green economy was thrust into the global limelight as one of two central items for discussion by world leaders at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012. Attempts to create a global consensus, however, ran up against opposition. The process brought to the fore a high level of contestation around the concept itself and dominant approaches to transition. For some developing country governments, green economy carries the baggage of Northern-driven conditionalities or regulations that might constrain growth and reinforce North-South inequalities; while many civil society and social groups are concerned with, among other issues, the scope for “corporate capture” and the contradictory impacts of proposed policies for livelihoods, natural resource use and management, and the cultural heritage of communities around the world.

A common element of many of the major critiques of the green economy approach refers ultimately to the general neglect (whether analytically or in policy terms) of the social dimension of sustainable development. The economic, technological and institutional changes that underpin green economy strategies often assume that the resulting greener growth will benefit the poor. But less attention has been paid to analysing the unequal or problematic social consequences of these policies, the structural determinants of inequality and unsustainable behaviour, or the social and power relations that shape policies, processes and outcomes. As governments, social actors and experts deliberate on how to connect green economy and social dimensions of development, there is a need to guard against narrow interpretations that reduce “the social” to “green jobs”, social protection for those negatively affected by transition, or that simply bolt the MDGs onto a green economy agenda. Unless social dimensions are addressed more comprehensively, there is a danger that efforts to connect green economy, sustainable development and poverty eradication will fail.

Centring social policy in the post-2015 debate: Drawing from UNRISD research

Social policies are interventions by governments that affect the welfare of individuals and communities. Universal social protection is now widely recognised as an essential contributor to development, with many countries committed to implement national social protection floors. Beyond this protective function, social policies can influence profound transformations across the economic, environmental and social domains—supporting economic productivity, raising human capital, reducing inequalities and sharing the burden of social reproduction—driving development outcomes in a more sustainable and inclusive direction (see box).

Transformative social policy

Social policy is concerned with four key functions:

- (i) *Protection*: protecting people from the contingencies of life, the vagaries of the market or the changing circumstances of age;
- (ii) *Production*: enhancing the productive potential of individuals for example through health, education and training, and through links with active labour policies;
- (iii) *Distribution*: Addressing gross disparities in income or well-being, ensuring a socially acceptable level of equality through direct social interventions or through managing the distributional

- impacts of other economic policies;
- (iv) *Reproduction*: sharing the tasks of reproduction and care between households, the state and other institutions, and reconciling it with paid employment.

These functions demonstrate the intrinsic linkages between social and economic policy domains. To be transformative, social policy cannot be limited to the residual role of assisting those at the margins of the economy, for example, through targeted transfers for poverty alleviation. Rather, integration among functions is needed to provide security and opportunity for individuals across the life-course, to share the burdens and benefits of economic growth, and to redistribute the costs of care. Conversely, inadequate attention to these broader functions of social policy can be a major factor undermining the sustainability of other development goals – generating social tensions over scarce jobs or resources, undermining health and productivity, or disinvesting in future generations. At the extreme, such failures may lead to violent conflict or generate further environmental degradation.

Beyond the more traditional social policy functions, many countries are now designing social policy initiatives that also incorporate environmental concerns. These “eco-social policies” aim to shift behaviours or provide incentives for more sustainable environmental management or resource use, strengthening the resilience or adaptive capacities of individuals and communities while also achieving social goals. Examples include cash transfers to reduce exploitation of resources in environmentally sensitive zones or as payment for environmental services; employment schemes that rehabilitate environmentally degraded areas; energy efficient public transport or housing systems; and the use of fiscal savings from reduced energy subsidies to expand social programmes.

Social policies thus play an essential role not only in reducing poverty but also in fostering economic development and in creating socially inclusive societies. They can be equally critical in ensuring fair access to environmental goods, services and resources necessary for sustainable development.

The remainder of this paper builds on this *transformative social policy approach* and outlines a number of key issues that, as noted above, are central to debates around social inclusion and sustainable development. These issues, which have been a major focus of UNRISD’s research over the past decade, have been relatively neglected in national and international development policy circles, but are now gaining increasing recognition. These relate to strategies that (i) move beyond a narrow focus on safety nets towards social policies concerned with universal social protection and redistribution; (ii) focus not only on equality of opportunity but also equality of outcome; (iii) place employment rather than growth at the centre of development policy; (iv) address one of the major gaps in development policy: paid and unpaid care work; (v) support notions of participation and empowerment that go beyond dialogue and entrepreneurship to embrace deeper changes in power relations.

Universalism

Social protection programmes not only provide access to income and social services throughout the lifecycle and in times of economic transition or crisis; they also reduce income and human poverty in its various dimensions by contributing to development and achieving more equal and socially inclusive societies. A universal approach to the provision of social services is essential to realizing their full potential as a component of transformative social policy. Achieving broad-based and inclusive coverage can contribute not only to improved well-being, but also to enhanced productivity and earnings and to reduced inequalities across income, class, gender, ethnicity and location. The challenge of extending

effective provision to populations often marginalized or excluded by these inequalities lies at the heart of efforts to reduce poverty and reach the targets of the MDGs. Narrowly targeted interventions may make inroads into particular aspects of poverty for specific population groups. However, without broad-based coverage that aims to redress such inequalities and generate solidarity around development goals, these gains may not be sustainable.

Integrated systems of social service provision grounded in universal principles can be redistributive, act as powerful drivers of solidarity and social inclusion, and improve the capabilities of the poor. By contrast, systems that are fragmented – with multiple providers, programmes and financing mechanisms aimed at different population groups – have limited potential for redistribution, and generally result in high costs, poor quality and limited access for the poor. Dominant policy trends since the 1980s, in a context of crisis, liberalization and public sector retrenchment, have been towards the commercialization of social services, undermining previous progress towards universal access in many countries, raising out-of-pocket costs particularly for the poor, and intensifying inequality and exclusion.

Universal Health Coverage in Thailand

Before Thailand introduced its Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) in 2001, nearly a third of the population had no health coverage (Tangcharoensathien et al. 2007). The vast majority of people who remained uncovered were in informal employment and many were too poor to pay insurance premiums. Recognizing this, the Thai government chose to use general revenues to fund the scheme, which pools funds for nearly 50 million people. The UCS provides universal access to healthcare including general medical care, in-patient care and rehabilitation services. In just ten years the scheme reduced the proportion of the population without health coverage from 30 per cent to less than four per cent, increased access to services, and improved financial risk protection (WHO, 2010). People living in poverty have benefited most; the proportion of families in the lowest income group facing catastrophic health care costs dropped from four per cent in 2000 to 0.9 per cent in 2006 when UHC was achieved. Thailand's success can be attributed to large-scale investment in primary health care and action to ensure adequate supplies of essential medicines and human resources. Strong political commitment and active civil society engagement were also critical (Oxfam, 2013).

Social Protection for Vulnerable Groups in Bolivia

The Renta Dignidad programme is a significant, historic step towards the strategy of implementing a social protection floor. Thanks to this programme, a universal right of access to an old-age pension has been secured through the Bolivian State Constitution. In operational terms, it has ensured that all Bolivians 60 years of age or older living in the country are now covered through an economic transfer programme that guarantees a minimum income for this vulnerable societal group. The funding sources of the Renta Dignidad, which are derived from the tax on hydrocarbons, are also a sign of political, economic and social consensus. The will of the people, which was to be able to receive a tangible benefit of ownership and sovereignty over their natural resources, has been translated into a policy of income redistribution. A sector such as the surplus-generating hydrocarbon sector directly contributes to the financing of the universal benefit. Considered as a successful programme of universal social protection, the programme is part of a strategic set of programmes that direct resources towards measures that secure and ensure a life of dignity for Bolivians. This comprehensive strategy has close ties with and the same purpose as the Social Protection Floor Initiative since it is aimed at upholding people's basic rights through its services and transfer components.

Source: UNDP, The Special Unit for South-South Cooperation and ILO (2011)

Equality of opportunity and outcome

Over the past two to three decades income inequalities have worsened: in the decade to 2000 more than two-thirds of the 85 countries for which data are available experienced an increase in income inequality as measured by the Gini index. As for global wealth concentration, at present the richest 1 per cent of the world's population owns 40 per cent of global assets; the bottom half of the world's population owns just 1 per cent of global wealth.

There is a growing recognition that market-centred approaches to development have exacerbated various forms of inequality and that the question of equality has not featured as prominently as it should on the international development agenda. Equality matters both for its intrinsic value as a human right and for instrumental reasons linked, for example, to economic growth and social cohesion. It is also essential for enhancing people's resilience to external crises and shocks. Inequalities are crucial for determining how people are affected by, for example, food and financial crises or climate change, and their capacities to respond and adapt to adversity and opportunity.

This broad perspective on equality points to the need to rethink current approaches to addressing the issue of inequality. While there is growing awareness of the ways in which inequality negatively impacts development, governments and international development agencies have often focused on addressing equality of opportunity, which is concerned with levelling the initial conditions people confront when attempting to secure their livelihoods and realize their cultural rights. While it is crucially important to improve access to quality health care, education and skills development in order to create a more level playing field, this approach tends to ignore structural factors that influence individual outcomes. Gender-based wage gaps, for example, often relate to disadvantage in the workplace that derives from unequal responsibilities for care work or discriminatory forces that are embedded in labour market institutions, such as gendered definitions of "skill" (Razavi 2011). Meanwhile, macroeconomic policies and market pressures that result in fiscal retrenchment can affect health care service and intensify the time women must spend engaged in unpaid care work.

Reducing the problem of inequality to equality of opportunity runs the risk of sidelining important policy instruments for tackling gross disparities in income, wealth and location. In addition to redistributive and investment policies, also important are macroeconomic policies geared towards employment generation; labour market regulations that compress wage gaps and modify hierarchical structures associated with exploitation and control of the workforce; and policies and programmes that proactively support smallholder agriculture.

Employment-centred development

Employment represents the single most important source of income for the majority of the world's people. While full employment and decent work are recognized as core universal development objectives, market-centred development strategies associated with economic liberalization are inadequate for realizing these objectives. The assumption that economic growth translates into significant employment growth, let alone decent work, is increasingly being questioned by evidence-based research. Parts of the world that have experienced relatively high growth have often experienced only moderate declines in levels of unemployment, while regions that have recently experienced renewed growth often experience a decline in the quality of employment. Rather than prioritizing growth strategies that see employment as a side effect, development strategies, including macroeconomic policy, need to prioritize employment and decent work as a primary development

objective. In addition to active labour market policies and the realization of labour rights, this implies greater consideration of, for example, countercyclical policies, public investment and public works, selected industrial policies, better integration of industry and agriculture, and regeneration of agriculture.

Labour market inequalities manifest themselves in relation to class, gender and ethnicity, and may take the form of casual, irregular and unprotected employment, longer working hours and low pay. They are also linked to other dimensions of inequality, such as asset holdings and access to services, social protection schemes and political power. Strategies for socially inclusive structural change should therefore be based on employment-centred growth and redistributive policies that address multiple inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity.

Beyond the challenge of regenerating employment after the global financial crisis, there are two fundamental concerns that policy makers need to confront head on in the post 2015 development agenda. First, the complexity of the employment challenge relates to the scale of the informal economy, growing casualization even within the formal economy, and the apparent inability of the formal sector, under present policy conditions, to absorb “surplus” labour from agriculture, as it did historically. The numbers of workers comprising the ILO’s category of “vulnerable employment” continues to grow, reaching 1.49 billion in developing countries in 2012 (ILO 2013). Tackling this challenge requires a mix of integrated policies, including skills development in the informal economy to enhance employability, the extension of social protection, a favourable regulatory environment, the promotion of labour rights, support for entrepreneurship and micro- and small enterprise development, local development and strengthened social dialogue.

The second 21st century challenge concerns how to generate employment in sectors and production systems that do not degrade the environment, as occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries. This has led to the current focus on eco-efficiency and “green jobs”, defined as “work in agricultural, manufacturing, research and development, administrative, and service activities that contribute to preserving or restoring environmental quality” (UNEP, ILO, IOE and ITUC 2008). Key in this regard are not only cleaner energy and technology, but also generating employment by expanding in low carbon social service sectors such as education, health, public transport and leisure, as well as retrofitting housing (Jackson 2011).

Double incorporation of good jobs and social services in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has been credited for one of the most successful experiences in simultaneously securing well-paid formal jobs and providing accessible and high-quality universal social services over the last six decades among developing countries. The state played a fundamental role through promoting policies that supported small and medium firms and cooperatives, expanding lending, creating public employment and increasing social spending. These policies were influenced by international ideas adapted to the local context, and driven by an emerging elite of small entrepreneurs and urban professionals who relied on their access to state power to increase their economic opportunities and secure social and political stability.

Sources: UNRISD (2014), Franzoni and Ancochea (2013)

Putting people at the centre of development strategies also means factoring into the analysis of vulnerability and inequality the impacts of macroeconomic and other policies associated with “business-as-usual”, including international trade and investment agreements, regressive and restrictive fiscal policies, budgetary imbalances associated with defence expenditures, liberalization of financial markets, and privatization of essential social services and the commons.

Social reproduction and care

Social reproduction is the bedrock of a sustainable and inclusive society and economy. It includes the (largely unpaid and invisible) work of caring for children, the sick and elderly; of ensuring a healthy and well-nourished labour force; and of playing a range of community roles necessary for cohesive societies—burdens that fall predominantly on women within households. Yet social reproduction and gender inequality in the division of care work remains a persistently neglected issue—including in the MDGs—despite significant attention to gender equity and the status of women in the global development agenda. The issue is also generally absent in national and global policy discussions around sustainable development. The costs of this neglect include unequal gender opportunities, including the marginalization of women in paid employment, and the poor quality of care or low human capital investments in many contexts. These in turn act as constraints on economic production.

While policies towards gender equality are critical, sustainability of social reproduction and the social processes that ensure that individuals are productive and that societies are cohesive cannot be left only to the household. The domestic sphere is integrally linked to the functioning of the economy and labour markets: the burden of social reproduction must be more equally shared, not only between men and women, but also between the household, state and market institutions. A growing body of evidence shows that policies that are good for “care” are not a luxury affordable only in high-income countries, but rather an essential foundation of sustainable development outcomes. Interventions that reduce the burden on households include greater investment in infrastructure (water and sanitation) and basic social services, including universal health care, pre-school child care facilities and school feeding programmes; family-oriented cash transfers for families with young children or subsidized housing for low-income families; ensuring adequate incomes for care-givers and care-receivers through paid work and social transfers; maternity and paternity leave; and making care more visible in statistics and public debates.

Work-life balance and public policy in Sweden

Sweden is an exemplary case of the robust supply-side growth in the post-WWII period, creating the conditions for women’s access to the labour market simultaneously with a positive policy context for work-family balance. As a result, this country has some of the best gender equality indicators in the labour market and enjoys relatively higher fertility rates in the European context despite high rates of female labour market activity. The public policy vision in Sweden has transformed from one of supporting ‘dual-earner families’ through provision of public childcare services to that of ‘dual-earner, dual-carer families’ through legislative reform for parental leave rights, encouraging fathers to take up their equal responsibility in parenting (Nyberg, 2010). Hence, Sweden can be said to provide a haven in terms of the generous combination of care-related leave for both men and women plus wide spread access to high-quality public child-care services.

Source: İlkkaracan (2012)

Participation and Empowerment

Participation and empowerment are critical drivers of inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. Such processes not only facilitate the design and implementation of both development policies and projects, but are also important for realizing human rights and strengthening people's capabilities. Participation involves more than giving disadvantaged groups a voice at the table; it is also about (i) strengthening their capacity to gain control over decision-making processes, and (ii) enhancing their capacity to exert claims on external actors and institutions that affect their lives. Public policy that purports to facilitate participation should be concerned as much with civil and political freedoms that enhance the capacity of disadvantaged groups and social movements to organize and mobilize—freedoms such as the right to information, assembly, expression, free press and collective bargaining—as engaging a select number of NGOs, trades unions and other civil society organizations in consultative processes. Furthermore consultative processes need to open to a diverse range of voices, including those of social movements (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin 2008).

Participation mechanisms must give disadvantaged groups a voice, empowering them to claim their rights, mobilize collectively and exercise influence over decisions that affect them. UNRISD research has identified three forms of participation or organized efforts that can be particularly relevant for inclusive sustainable development: (i) resource mobilization at the local or community level, which often acts as a precondition for (ii) access and influence in decision-making and governance processes; and (iii) advocacy by social movements to reframe policy debates on development priorities and pathways. Such processes may challenge existing structures and relations of power, opening spaces for contestation and negotiation over policies and resources. Nonetheless, such forms of empowered participation are central to achieving a fair, inclusive and sustainable development path.

This note was compiled based primarily on existing UNRISD publications, in particular:

- Dugarova, E. and Utting, P., 2013. *Social Drivers of Sustainable Development*. Prepared as an input to the Note by the Secretariat, Emerging Issues: The Social Drivers of Sustainable Development (E/CN.5/2014/8, 52nd session of the Commission for Social Development). Brief based on this note is available at: www.unrisd.org/b2015_4
- Cook, S., Smith, K., and Utting, P., 2012. Green Economy or Green Society? Contestation and Policies for a Fair Transition. *UNRISD Occasional Paper*, 10.
- UNRISD, 2010. *UNRISD Flagship Report 2010 Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural change, social policy and politics*. Geneva: UNRISD.
- A series of UNRISD “Beyond 2015” Briefs that contribute research-based insight and analysis to the dialogue around the post-MDG development agenda: www.unrisd.org/post2015

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