

# SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

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UNRISD Research Agenda  
2010-2014





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March 2011

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## Summary

The UNRISD research agenda for 2010–2014 is grounded in a particular understanding of social development, including not only improvements in material well-being but also progress in relation to equity, social cohesion and democratic participation. Over the past decade, UNRISD research has focused on how social policy contributes to development. Flagship programmes on social policy and on poverty reduction examined the effectiveness of state policies that aim directly to influence the welfare and security of diverse social groups, and the relationships between such policies, economic development and democratic politics.

The 2010–2014 research agenda builds on the insights and findings of previous work while responding to a changed context for development. It was designed at a moment of global crisis and growing uncertainty—over the economy, the environment, and the type of politics or governance arrangements that can lead to equitable and sustainable development. The global interdependence on which economic growth and poverty reduction were premised had become instead a conduit for inequality and crisis. The aspirations of the new millennium to “make poverty history” faced unforeseen challenges. Many development certainties were shattered but real alternatives remained elusive.

This context creates a new climate and urgency for thinking about the social dimensions of development. It sharpens the focus on critical gaps and questions that need research—for understanding failures in policy and practice, as well as for identifying successful or promising alternatives. It highlights the uncertainties—in people’s lives, in the global economy, and in the field of development ideas—that are a central feature of the contemporary world. The context calls for re-framing the development problem, recognizing the possibility of multiple paths to achieve diverse goals—not only income growth and poverty reduction, but equality and rights, social and environmental justice, cultural recognition and political participation.

The 2010–2014 agenda presented in this document responds to the altered context and the urgent need for research and effective policies on social development. It took form through consultation with academic and civil society stakeholders, while also responding to the current priorities of the United Nations system. The agenda has three main objectives:

- to generate knowledge that responds to global developments and the changing context and that addresses gaps that have emerged in the course of current research;
- to examine issues or knowledge gaps that are not being addressed adequately or sufficiently by other research networks within the United Nations system; and
- to inform policy debates and options relating to contemporary social development and poverty reduction challenges.

Research will be organized under two main themes: *Social Policies for Inclusive and Sustainable Development*, and *Political and Institutional Dynamics of Social Development*. This document presents the main topics that will be the focus of UNRISD research under these themes, but flexibility also exists to ensure that the Institute can respond to issues as they emerge and to requests for research from United Nations entities.

In order to implement the research discussed here, it will be necessary for UNRISD to mobilize additional funding. In this respect, it should be noted that UNRISD is funded

exclusively by voluntary contributions from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations and United Nations agencies.

The remainder of this document is organized as follows. Section 1 presents the context shaping the current research agenda. Section 2 defines the scope of social development as used in UNRISD research, and the importance of such research in meeting contemporary development challenges. Section 3 situates the agenda in relation to distinctive features of UNRISD's mandate and institutional location. Section 4 discusses in more depth the research themes and topics. Section 5 discusses how UNRISD implements its research and related activities, outlining how we plan to communicate our research findings and engage with diverse audiences and users in order to maximize our impact.

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# 1. Introduction

A decade has passed since the global community mobilized around the Millennium Declaration with commitments to “make poverty history”. In a world shaken by crisis, the contemporary challenges to economic and social development are now of a magnitude and complexity that was not imagined at the turn of the millennium. The aspirations (whether the broad ambitions arising from the United Nations conferences of the 1990s, or the specific targets of the Millennium Development Goals) seem more elusive than ever. Global interdependence, rather than transmitting the promised benefits of liberalization and growth, has been a conduit for shared crisis and rising inequalities. The interrelated shocks in food, fuel and financial markets have further undermined the already precarious livelihoods of millions of people, threatening the limited progress of previous decades. Simultaneously, an unsustainable development model and its climate consequences are limiting the options available to less developed countries and to poorer populations who are often located in the most fragile environments. Without deliberate, collective intervention, poverty and exclusion may well intensify, and with it the likelihood of conflict over limited natural resources.

This backdrop of acute uncertainty creates a new climate and urgency for thinking about the social dimensions of development. If we believe that development should be, first and foremost, about creating the conditions in which individuals and the communities to which they belong can live with security, realize their rights and be empowered to participate in the processes and decisions which affect their lives, we are confronted with various failures. These include the failure of the neoliberal model to deliver equitable growth; the consequent rise in inequalities and exclusion; a fragility of institutional and governance arrangements at multiple levels; and limited space for national diversity in policy choice. Recent crises serve to sharpen the focus on critical gaps and questions that need research—both to explain failures in past policy and practice, and to identify successful or promising alternatives. Answers are essential for promoting short-term recovery with minimal social dislocation in ways that simultaneously lay the foundations for longer term trajectories out of poverty, create conditions for enhanced resilience to future crisis, promote equitable and sustainable growth, and ensure access of all people to just institutions of governance.

This is not to ignore the progress of recent decades, nor to suggest that the problems exposed by crisis had previously gone unrecognized. Since the mid-1990s, when the world’s leaders met for the World Summit for Social Development and UNRISD published its flagship report *States of Disarray: The Social Effects of Globalization*, the international development community has made progress in addressing the contradictions and social costs of a range of policies associated with global economic integration and market liberalization. There has been a concerted global campaign against poverty, and concerns with social protection and employment have re-emerged on the policy agenda. Nonetheless, core elements of mainstream policy approaches associated with structural adjustment, poverty reduction strategies and the MDGs have proved to be wanting, if not contradictory, from the perspective of social development. Alternative approaches—generated by social movements, national governments, academics and multilateral forums—suggest that there is no “one right way”. They include a new developmentalism, rights-based agendas and “alter-globalization” initiatives. The current crisis is as much about ideas as it is material.

This context of uncertainty in development thinking and practice provides a challenging moment for launching the Institute’s 2010–2014 research agenda. One challenge is to respond with greater urgency to multiple and ongoing crises. There is a demand for evidence of alternative pathways for reducing poverty, protecting the vulnerable, and

promoting longer term trajectories of growth that are more socially equitable and sustainable than those of recent decades. Another is to achieve progress in a climate of fiscal constraint, with a strong likelihood that reduced or more narrowly targeted donor funding will further limit resources and capacities both to undertake research that generates new evidence, and to implement innovative solutions on the ground. These challenges directly affect the ability of UNRISD to raise the resources necessary to fulfil its mission. Yet in order to implement the research discussed here, it will be necessary for UNRISD to mobilize additional funding. In this respect, it should be noted that UNRISD is funded exclusively by voluntary contributions from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations and United Nations agencies.

This document lays out a vision of the research UNRISD plans to undertake over the next five years.<sup>1</sup> The agenda is grounded in a particular understanding of social development, including not only improvements in material well-being but also progress in relation to social cohesion, equity and democratic participation. Section 2 defines the scope of social development as used in UNRISD research, and the essential role of such research in meeting contemporary development challenges. The agenda also builds on distinctive features of UNRISD, rooted in its mandate, institutional location and past work, which shape its contribution to development research and policy (section 3). Section 4 provides the framework which defines current choices for new research, and outlines the major themes around which UNRISD proposes to organize this research. Research topics and activities on which we plan to work subject to funding are described, but flexibility also exists to ensure that the Institute can respond to emerging issue. The final section discusses how UNRISD implements its research and related activities, outlining how we plan to communicate our research findings and engage with diverse audiences and users in order to maximize our impact.

## 2. Social Development: Definition and Contemporary Challenges

### Defining social development

UNRISD adopts a broad definition of social development—one that is concerned with *processes of change that lead to improvements in human well-being, social relations and social institutions, and that are equitable, sustainable, and compatible with principles of democratic governance and social justice.*

The definition emphasizes *social relations, institutional arrangements and political processes* that are central to efforts to achieve desirable development outcomes. It includes material achievements, such as good health and education, and access to the goods and services necessary for decent living; and social, cultural and political achievements, such as a sense of security, dignity, the ability to be part of a community through social and cultural recognition, and political representation.

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<sup>1</sup> This research agenda was designed through consultation with a range of user-constituencies. Approximately 30 researchers based in academic institutions, international organizations and bilateral agencies responded to an email survey which aimed to identify emerging issues and gaps in knowledge in the field of social development. UNRISD organized a two-day workshop of advocacy NGOs. Regular interactions with United Nations processes and agencies ensured attention to their priorities. Drafts were discussed with the UNRISD Board in November 2009 and June 2010, and at a meeting of donors in March 2010.



This definition also encompasses both *process* and *outcome*. Improvements in material well-being through processes which deny some individuals or groups voice in decision making, or access to recourse against injustice, are unlikely to be sustainable over the longer term; conversely, apparently inclusive or democratic processes which lead to inequitable outcomes will tend eventually to be undermined or resisted.

From this perspective, UNRISD has consistently engaged with efforts to ensure that mainstream development thinking moves beyond a singular focus on economic growth and material well-being (measured in terms of income or GDP), or concern with the agency of the individual, towards an approach that integrates social and collective dimensions into the fundamental conceptualization, measurement and practice of development. Our approach involves rejecting the widely accepted dualism of *the economic* and *the social*, which places social issues and policies in a subordinate and residual position. It recognizes that the achievement of development is always a political process, involving contestation, struggles for the representation and recognition of groups with competing interests, and requiring the redistribution of power and resources. And it emphasizes the intrinsic value of diversity in ideas and open debate about alternative policy options that are feasible under different circumstances.

## Contemporary challenges: Crisis and uncertainty

A focus on the social dimensions of development is clearly as urgent now as it has ever been. The juxtaposition of immeasurable suffering—whether from natural or human-induced crises—alongside unimaginable wealth accumulation for the few; and of vast sums expended by governments to assist financial institutions, compared with the resources dedicated to the crisis of poverty, contradicts any acceptable norms of justice. Daily events highlight the violation of rights enshrined in many United Nations conventions—to survival, childhood, health and happiness, freedom from fear, dignity and respect, and control over one’s own life. As long as these basic rights are denied to hundreds of millions of people worldwide, the imperative exists for continued policy-relevant research on issues of social development.

Recent, ongoing and recurrent crises have exposed the depth of human insecurity and the inadequacy of systemic and structural reforms over the past three decades to create sustainable and equitable growth, or to move poor countries and populations on to a stable development trajectory. The context is thus one in which many development certainties have been shattered, and the pervasive uncertainties under which the majority live have come to the forefront of global attention. A future research agenda must thus be shaped by the expectation that uncertainty—in people’s lives, in the global economy, and in the field of development ideas—will be a significant feature of the next few years.

The impact of the global crisis of 2008–2009, particularly on low-income countries, is deeply rooted in longer term development strategies and policy choices. A package of market-led liberalization reforms, initiated in the 1970s and applied to developing countries through the structural adjustment and stabilization programmes of the 1980s, imposed heavy costs on the poorest countries and peoples, leading in much of Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa to a “lost decade” of development. Criticism of the human cost of adjustment programmes helped to move development debates during the 1990s from the market fundamentalism of the previous decade towards a gentler version of neoliberalism, sometimes referred to as the post-Washington consensus. This was marked by a recognition of market imperfections and failures that undermined many of the Washington consensus policy prescriptions; an acknowledgement of the crucial role of

non-market institutions, including the state, in promoting development; and the belated realization that the historical legacy—pre-existing conditions and institutional arrangements—matters.

This shift in policy focus created space for a return to more active poverty reduction and social policies, and to renewed attention to employment creation as an essential component of pro-poor growth. Led by the Bretton Woods institutions, new development strategies emerged around the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), debt relief and a good governance agenda. Greater emphasis was placed on national ownership of development strategies (through PRSPs and budget support, for example). Following the Asian crisis, the social protection agenda also broadened from narrowly targeted *ex post* safety nets to a focus on diverse forms of “social risk” that could be better managed through a range of mitigation, insurance and assistance measures.

Other actors—in NGOs, academia, national governments, the United Nations system and other international organizations—have gone further in arguing for more radical shifts in approach. Distinctive country-led development paths have emerged, while new social and political movements have mobilized around alternatives that emphasize distributive justice, rights-based development, empowerment, small-scale or collective forms of production, and the ecological dimensions of development.

Many critiques of the neoliberal policy agenda appeared to be vindicated by early responses to the 2008–2009 crisis among rich countries, particularly the demand-side stimulus packages used to kick-start growth and provide some level of social protection. However, while there may be a widely shared critique of the existing system, there is significant variation in terms of analysis of the problem and possible solutions. Thus while underlying structural problems made visible by crisis are acknowledged, responses have been concerned principally with immediate consequences (through support for financial institutions and the global economic system) rather than attempting a paradigmatic shift to address the fundamental causes of crisis and the structural impediments to development.

The challenge for contemporary development thinking is thus to move beyond critique towards alternative and multiple ways of framing the development problem, leading in turn to the recognition of diverse development paths. The response to crisis must place greater emphasis on recovery and development that is about people, society, social relations and institutional arrangements, and not simply be about a return to growth. This involves recognizing a diversity of possible development objectives, not only income growth and poverty reduction, but also enhanced productive capacity and employment, equity and inclusion, social justice and empowerment. Such alternatives need to value diversity of ideas, strategies and policies, rather than seeking a single solution; to have the flexibility to respond to uncertainty at multiple levels; and to recognize that political process and power configurations (whether at local, national or global level) are also important in determining policy alternatives.

A crucial task at this juncture is to produce research and mobilize evidence to show the feasibility of such alternatives, and to channel such findings in ways to achieve influence. Research on the social dimensions of development must be a key input to such a process, and should aim to re-position *the social* centrally in development debates and policies that are taking shape in a world reshaped by crisis.

## 3. What Makes UNRISD Distinctive

### Mandate and institutional location

The nature of UNRISD research is conditioned by its mandate and institutional context. UNRISD was established as an autonomous space within the United Nations system for the conduct of policy-relevant research on social development that is pertinent to the work of the United Nations Secretariat; regional commissions and specialized agencies; and national institutions.

Thus, as the United Nations Research Institute for *Social Development*, all UNRISD research must hinge on this dimension of contemporary development, defined broadly in the normative sense of improvements in social well-being, social institutions and social relations. Furthermore, in order to be policy-relevant, topics and issues that form the basis of research projects are ones that are of concern to the United Nations system and its member states. UNRISD also has a role to play in anticipating issues that are not yet on the mainstream policy agenda, but about which concerns have emerged within academia or civil society advocacy networks.

The Institute was granted autonomous status to allow it the freedom to be critical of mainstream agendas and policies, to challenge conventional wisdom, to tackle sensitive issues or identify blind spots in the development discourse, and to propose alternatives. UNRISD work has consistently challenged dominant economic approaches that relegate social issues to a secondary or residual position in policy making. It has explored alternative institutional and policy arrangements, and the social relations and coalitions that can enhance well-being, social justice and democratic accountability. This research has influenced major shifts in thinking in areas such as gender, participation, social movements, corporate accountability, social impacts of globalization and the role of social policy in development. In a context where a small number of large institutions have wielded almost monopolistic influence on development thinking and practice, there is an ever more pressing need to strengthen institutional spaces where alternative views can be shaped and articulated. This benefit constitutes a global public good, beyond the value of specific research contributions being undertaken at any particular point in time.

As an autonomous research institute within the United Nations system, UNRISD has an unusual capacity to convene diverse scholars and actors from around the world and to engage in policy debates. UNRISD brings a distinctive and often challenging perspective to such debates: it has a strong tradition of examining the social impacts of longer term processes of structural and social change; it does so with a focus on underlying causes and constraints, institutional arrangements and power relationships which determine outcomes for different groups; and it consistently argues for placing social issues at the heart of development policy. It achieves this through close research partnerships with an extensive network of institutions and scholars, particularly in the global South. These Southern research partnerships are perceived to be one of UNRISD's main assets and ensure distinctive perspectives emerge through our multi-country comparative studies.

UNRISD also positions itself in relation to research taking place elsewhere. As a United Nations research centre situated at the interface of international development agencies, academia and civil society organizations, the choice of research topics must be informed by current thinking, debates and gaps in knowledge within these constituencies, while avoiding unnecessary duplication. In the United Nations system, this may mean working on cross-cutting or intersectoral issues such as inequality and social integration, which are often crowded out by the sectoral focus of specialized agencies. In relation to academia, UNRISD is able to promote policy-applied, multidisciplinary and cross-country comparative research that spans multiple regions, drawing on an extensive global research

network and connecting researchers with international policy circuits. From the perspective of developing country research partners and advocacy or civil society groups, UNRISD offers opportunities to engage in global comparative research projects together with access to such policy networks. These institutional features give UNRISD a distinctive capacity to undertake research that helps to frame agendas, provide evidence and influence policy.

## Continuity and change

The 2010–2014 agenda builds on UNRISD’s past research, aiming to strike a balance between continuity and change. The problems of social development of contemporary interest to the United Nations system, academia and civil society are, of course, both old and new. Long-standing issues related to human insecurity, poverty, livelihoods, inequality, discrimination, conflict, identity, social cohesion, participation and empowerment will continue to generate new research focusing on the situation of different social groups and societal contexts. UNRISD research has consistently been concerned with such issues in contexts of globalization, liberalization, structural change, crisis and contestation. It has examined the effectiveness of public policies and institutions at multiple levels in promoting inclusive and sustainable development. The 2010–2014 research agenda will draw on the Institute’s track record and international recognition in certain fields of inquiry, as well as the extensive research and policy networks and in-house expertise built up through past programmes. Based on research over the past decade, a number of key areas stand out for continued inquiry.

First, through its work on *social policy in a development context*, UNRISD has been at the forefront of international development thinking that has reasserted the centrality of social policy in development strategies. UNRISD work on social policy relates not only to the effectiveness of particular instruments to meet defined goals, but also to a broader concern, namely the disembedding of the economy and growth processes from society, and the marginalization of social policy as a residual field of policy intervention. The Institute’s research of the past decade has revealed the crucial role that social policy has played both historically and more recently in both economic and social development. The *transformative* potential for social policy is grounded in multiple roles that extend beyond social protection and human capital formation to address aspects of production, redistribution, reproduction and care, social cohesion, nation-building and democratization. Theoretical and empirical research has demonstrated that social policy can be an instrument for economic development and growth without compromising intrinsic values of democracy, equity and human security; and consequently that economic and social development objectives are achievable in tandem, through the design and implementation of progressive social policies which complement appropriate economic policies and governance systems.

Second, research on *poverty reduction and policy regimes* engaged with current policy debates on poverty reduction from a developmental and social policy perspective, again highlighting the complex interactions between processes of economic, social and political change. Published in 2010 as the flagship report, *Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics*, the findings generate a strong, empirically grounded case for an approach to poverty reduction rooted in patterns of structural change that generate employment, combined with universal approaches to social policy. The report brings inequality back centrally into discussions of poverty reduction, emphasizing the importance of a redistributive agenda—both in terms of material resources (income and assets), and in terms of power, representation and recognition. It also elaborates the case for a progressive politics that alters power relations and creates active citizens and responsive and accountable states.

Third, for over two decades UNRISD has played a leading role in highlighting and understanding the diverse and often contradictory effects of liberalization—both economic and political—for women, brought together in the 2005 flagship report, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*. Recent research has examined the gendered structure of social policy and welfare regimes, how the social and political economy of care shapes gender and social inequalities, and the interface of religion and politics and its implications for gender equality. UNRISD has sought to establish the centrality of gender equality in ongoing efforts to meet key development challenges: economic growth and structural transformation; equality and social protection; and democratization. It has highlighted the ways in which gender power relations and inequalities are constantly embedded, challenged and re-embedded across diverse institutional arenas, from the household, through local and national state institutions, markets and macroeconomic flows, and civil society and social movements. Research will continue to examine the ways in which public policies, market processes and social relations yield opportunities and place constraints on women’s access to authority, power, income and other entitlements.

Fourth, UNRISD research has maintained a consistent focus on issues of participation, social movements and the role of non-state actors in governance and social development. Over several decades this body of work has focused on civil society and social movements, and their role in contestation, governance and social provisioning. More recently, research on non-state actors has extended to include business actors, including transnational enterprises and corporate elites. A body of critical research highlighted concerns related to the social and regulatory dimensions of privatization in the fields of health care and water. In a context where much of the international development community in general, and the United Nations system in particular, has turned to large corporations as partners in development, UNRISD research provides a more cautionary tale of the role of corporations in social development whether through corporate social responsibility and public-private partnerships, or in global governance networks and private regulation.

The perspectives provided by these and other areas of UNRISD research contribute compelling evidence and arguments for new approaches to poverty reduction and equitable development as MDG progress is under review, as appropriate forms of social protection that contribute both to recovery and longer term resilience are explored, and as new architectures for global governance—relating to finance, economy, climate and social issues—are being shaped.

## Conceptual approach

Framing much of the research described above is a distinctive, and continually evolving, conceptual approach. This arises from analysis of the fundamental problem which UNRISD was founded to address—*the separation and marginalization of the social in development thinking*. Significant progress has been made in addressing problems arising from the way in which social or human dimensions of development have been marginalized in development policy. New approaches (human development and capabilities, for example) have helped to broaden the focus from narrowly economic indicators and outcomes. Policy shifts since the mid-1990s have drawn attention to social sectors and policies as important complements to economic development strategies that contribute to human capital formation, productivity and growth.

Despite such progress, significant shortcomings remain in the way and the extent to which the social has been integrated into development thinking. It continues to be treated as:

- A *residual set of issues in the policy arena* and often an afterthought in the sequencing of policy decisions. Many economic decisions are principally driven by efficiency objectives, with any detrimental social effects viewed as something to be addressed through compensatory interventions. How would policies change if improved social outcomes became a core objective of economic policy making?
- A *subordinate set of indicators of development*, with GDP growth still the dominant measure, and thus often the most important target shaping the decisions of policy makers and the behaviour of government officials. This leads to the neglect, for example, of redistributive or broader social protection interventions when these are seen as slowing growth in the short term.
- A *sector that is autonomous* or not integrated into the economy, as, for example, in the treatment of the family and care work as separate from the market economy and state provision, rather than focusing on the interlinkages between economy and society or recognizing the social embeddedness of the economy.

Addressing these shortcomings requires a conceptualization of development in which the domains of society, economy and polity (as well as the relationship between humans and their natural environment) are explicitly recognized as closely connected and interdependent. While maintaining a distinctive emphasis on the social dimensions of development and on the social sphere, UNRISD research presupposes that sustainable and equitable development requires finding an appropriate equilibrium between social, economic, political and environmental demands. UNRISD research adds particular value by analysing issues and relationships at the intersection of these spheres, through an approach that incorporates the following key elements.

- A focus on *social institutions, relations and processes*, and on the essential interconnectedness between social, economic and political dimensions of development.
- A *structural approach* to understanding social outcomes (poverty, inequality, vulnerability, exclusion) in terms of the underlying causes rooted in institutions, social relations and power, rather than as an immediate consequence of short-term economic shocks or risk factors. This in turn requires an analytical focus not on specific affected groups, but on the nature of the systems and processes that expose certain groups to vulnerability and perpetuate poverty.
- Recognition that *processes of social change* involve competing or conflicting interests, power, relationships, forms of organizing and participation. Integrating the political dimensions into an analysis of social development involves understanding actors in the social sphere, not merely as the passive receptors of state policies or the victims of processes, but as proactive agents from which innovative discourses, practices and institutional proposals emerge to challenge and reorient existing development strategies.
- Analysis of the *interaction* between economic context, choices and policies, on the one hand, and social policies and outcomes, on the other. This involves not only examining the unidirectional impact of economic policies, but more importantly analysing the complex relationships between social and economic spheres, at both micro and (a more neglected area of research) macro levels.
- A focus on what kind of *policies* need to be adopted to achieve desirable social outcomes, as well as on how such outcomes can be achieved

under different economic and political circumstances. Thus it addresses both *policies* and *politics* pertinent to the achievement of social goals.

## 4. Research Themes and Projects

UNRISD research for 2010–2014 aims to deepen the analysis of social development in contexts of crisis and heightened uncertainty, reflecting the centrality of social development to human progress. Specific projects will contribute to understanding (i) how to overcome poverty and inequality, by extending social policies and protection to marginalized groups under different economic and political conditions; and (ii) the political processes underpinning the achievement of poverty reduction and social justice. Research on social policy and the politics of social development will inform current debates around poverty reduction and alternative development strategies for balanced and inclusive growth. It will contribute to United Nations processes, including the elaboration of a post-MDG poverty reduction agenda and preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012. In implementing its research agenda, UNRISD will continue to engage with heterodox thinkers and highlight diverse perspectives, particularly the voices of Southern researchers.

The social dimensions of crisis and uncertainty discussed in the preceding sections, and the findings from prior research, suggest a number of overarching questions and research gaps to be addressed.

- How can social policies be designed and implemented to ensure a transformative and developmental impact, particularly in challenging contexts such as high levels of informality, insecurity or migration?
- In the light of crisis and uncertainty, what roles must national, regional and global institutions play to ensure equitable and sustainable development outcomes?
- What kinds of institutional arrangements and actors (from local to global levels) can improve human well-being both by reducing avoidable risks, and by responding effectively to those that cannot be avoided?
- What political arrangements, including accountability mechanisms, participatory institutions and citizen action, are effective in ensuring the commitment of states and other actors to social goals?

The agenda is framed around two main themes that respond to different aspects of such questions: *Social Policies for Inclusive and Sustainable Development* and *Politics and Institutional Dynamics of Social Development*. *Gender equity and women's empowerment*—a hallmark of UNRISD research—is addressed both through specific projects under each theme, and through integration across all research and activities.

Topics for research identified under each theme are described below and summarized in the annex table.

## Theme 1: Social policies for inclusive and sustainable development

UNRISD research on *transformative social policy* has contributed to a critical, and now increasingly mainstream, literature drawing attention to the relationships between *production, distribution, reproduction and protection*, and the role of social policy in promoting these multiple economic and social objectives. While the terminology and ideas are now widely adopted in research and policy debates at national and global levels, and new studies are being generated, there remain gaps and unanswered questions. How can lessons from the positive experiences, identified in previous research, of welfare developmentalism and transformative social policies, be applied in low-income or resource-constrained, predominantly rural or highly informal economies, or in states with weak governance institutions and capacities? What is the relationship between developmental social policies and political regime or forms of democratic governance? How can the goal of universalism be achieved in practice? And what is the relationship between macroeconomic and social policies?

Specific projects will be developed to address the following issues.

### Alternative approaches to social policy and social development

The global context of crisis and uncertainty highlights the urgency of identifying development policies that simultaneously promote productivity and growth alongside greater inclusiveness, sustainability and empowerment. In many parts of the developing world we are seeing the emergence of innovative social and economic policies which appear to offer promising alternative approaches, whether in terms of state-led policies or through the demand of social movements and grassroots initiatives. First, a number of states (particularly emerging economies) are pursuing social policies as integral parts of development strategies which diverge both from dominant prescriptions of the development community, and from each other. Research on the nature and political economy of social policies in emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil will allow for an examination of the conditions for success and the limits of differing national strategies and interventions. Second, diverse forms of social economy approaches, such as self-help and cooperative forms of organization, social enterprise, or food sovereignty and agro-ecology programmes, may also create alternative models and pressures for a more socially inclusive development strategy. Can such initiatives be effectively scaled up and replicated? What happens to their transformative potential when local and national governments, corporations and international agencies actively engage in their promotion?

As well as identifying such innovations and alternatives, it is also necessary to analyse the transferability of relevant lessons for other countries. Reflecting mainstream theories of development centred on economic growth, explanations of successful development have often marginalized the role of social policy, regarding it as a residual or compensatory component of development strategies. Successful experiences show, however, that both growth and poverty reduction arise from appropriate coordination of economic and social policies. Learning from such experiences should take into account this observation while giving sufficient attention to the specificities of local context and the historical foundations of local institutions. Research on the Republic of Korea's development experience will provide a first case study aiming to understand the institutional configuration needed for both economic growth and social development. It will focus on the role of institutions in the economic and social policy spheres in the Republic of Korea and draw lessons for Korea's assistance to developing countries in particular, with implications more generally for low-income economies.



## Social policy, informality, migration and gender

Delivering social policies remains a major challenge in environments characterized by high and often growing levels of informality—not only of employment, but also in terms of how business is done, services accessed, laws enforced, fees collected or taxes avoided. Informal employment and its connections to social policy is a key starting point for understanding the pervasive informal or unregulated institutional arrangements and relationships that shape economic and welfare outcomes. What social policies are possible in environments with high levels of informal employment? What are the implications for extending and financing social protection in these circumstances? Research will focus on inclusive social policies for informal workers with a particular focus on the implications of informality for women and their access to social protection.

Another population group with tenuous claims on social protection is migrant labour. Existing research focuses largely on South-North migrant flows. However, there is large-scale South-South migration between countries (as well as within large emerging economies) with often poorly developed social welfare systems. How should social protection and provisioning for this group be addressed, and by whom? What is the potential role of regional alongside national governance institutions? Research will focus on the nexus between migration, development and social policy in both sending and receiving countries, and on the potential role of governance institutions at different levels. Attention will also be given to the gender dimensions of migration and related issues of care work and care deficits. A project on internal migration in China will focus specifically on the relationship between migration and health.

## Universalizing social policies

Despite a broad consensus on the values of universalism, for example in the provision of basic infrastructure and services including transportation, water and sanitation, basic health care and education for all, and in basic social security, strategies to achieve these goals are as diverse as historical experiences of social protection systems. Variation exists in terms of the role of the public and private sectors, mechanisms for mobilizing, allocating and redistributing resources, and the perceived impact of specific programmes on poverty and inequality. Why and how have some states successfully achieved universalism in social protection while others not? What makes a society move towards universalism? What role do targeted programmes play in the process of universalization? Moving beyond existing analyses of the welfare regimes of advanced countries, on the one hand, and the (often technical) dichotomization of universal and targeted approaches, on the other, successful and unsuccessful experiences of social protection will be examined. The inquiry will consider expansion of coverage, the generosity of benefits and improvements in quality whether through universal or targeted interventions. A focus on the complementarities among welfare institutions, synergies between social protection and economic growth, and the continuity and change of institutional arrangements in moving towards universalism, will enable us to draw policy lessons particularly for developing countries.

## Macroeconomic policies, fiscal space and the financing of social policy

An appropriate macroeconomic environment and adequate fiscal resources are prerequisites for desirable social policies. A major gap in the literature concerns the relationship between macroeconomic policies and social development. A starting point for such research is analysis of public sector spending and social development in the wake of crisis. What role do social policies and investments play in promoting growth, economic stability, labour market functioning and social cohesion? What complementary macroeconomic policies most effectively contribute to social development goals? How

can we assess the social, economic and often political costs of alternative social policies, drawing on historical and contemporary experiences? Likewise, little is known about the distributional and efficiency consequences of alternative mechanisms for mobilizing and allocating resources to finance social policy. Building on earlier research, a project on financing social policy in times of crisis will explore options and constraints for financing social policy in diverse country contexts under circumstances of fiscal stimulus and austerity.

## **Theme 2: Politics and institutional dynamics of social development**

The second organizing theme of the research programme will focus on the political processes and institutional arrangements that foster positive social change. Research will examine the politics and processes through which state and non-state actors can deliver improved welfare outcomes to citizens. Social development requires effective and accountable states, institutionalization of rights, sustained public engagement, and types of politics that empower groups, such as the poor or those marginalized, for example, by ethnicity, to exercise influence in how policies are made and resources allocated. Policy reforms for effective states with progressive social agendas and active citizenship remain disappointing, often ignoring structural factors that reproduce inequalities in power relations, or neglecting informal kinds of mobilization and citizen action. What are the possibilities for democratic developmental states with an active citizenry and enforceable social contract in the twenty-first century?

Specific projects will be developed to address the following issues.

### **Politics of domestic resource mobilization for social development**

Linked to research on financing social policy (described above), new research will seek to explore the conditions under which aid-dependent countries can mobilize domestic resources to finance social development; changes in state-citizen and donor-recipient relations associated with the dynamics of resource mobilization and allocation; and governance reforms that can lead to improved and sustainable revenue yields and service provision. A context of constrained public finances intensifies contestation and competing claims over the mobilization and allocation of resources. How can states be held responsive to citizens, and how can citizens effectively make claims on the state to ensure that resources are mobilized and allocated for improved social outcomes? What is the role of political elites and emerging middle classes in developing progressive social contracts? What mediating structures, delivery and accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure the inclusion and representation of the poor or disadvantaged in such processes?

### **Making claims: Participatory institutions, activism and empowerment**

Ensuring resources are allocated for progressive social development purposes requires participatory mechanisms that enable citizens to deliberate over the provision of public goods and services. Does the creation of participatory institutions help improve access of the poor to public goods? Do such innovations allow subordinate groups to effectively assert political power and to positively challenge existing patterns of poverty and inequality? To what extent can such innovations be successfully replicated beyond their original context? Projects will focus on different dimensions of this topic, examining the nature of participatory institutions oriented to empowering disadvantaged and socially excluded groups, in order to highlight how some forms of institutional innovation can address the challenges of social inequality in developing countries, while simultaneously contributing to democratic deepening.

One project will examine these questions specifically in relation to women. It will explore how and when claims for gender equality are facilitated by engagement with the state, by exploring the interface of institutional structures and political agency with regard to women's rights and entitlements in three broad areas: personal autonomy and bodily integrity; livelihoods; and welfare entitlements. What role have women's rights advocates played in lobbying for and designing policy responses; with what input from women's constituencies; through what kinds of alliances with other social movements, political parties and state agencies? What role have global ideas and legal conventions played in such processes?

The changing nature of governance means that civil society actors interact with policy processes, exert claims and seek redress in diverse ways. These include protest, advocacy campaigns, lobbying, bargaining, participation in knowledge networks and policy dialogue, private standard-setting and grievance procedures. Proposed research on global justice activism in times of crisis will examine if, and how, these different forms of activism and participation enable civil society actors to gain control and influence over resources and regulatory institutions in key issue areas related to food and land, social policy, corporate accountability and macroeconomic policy. Particular attention will be paid to examining the changing dynamics of global justice activism and participation in the context of the contemporary food and financial crises.

### Regulation, markets and corporate accountability

While the state remains a central actor in market and business regulation, and citizens and social movements are essential in claims-making and accountability, private actors—including NGOs and enterprises in the corporate and social sectors (such as water, health and education)—also play a significant role. What forms of regulation and accountability, involving which actors and mechanisms, are most effective from the perspective of social development? Two sets of issue areas are of particular interest. First, how should markets for essential services be organized and regulated, and made compatible with social goals of universal access? Attention here will focus on the situation in low-income countries where the commercialization of social services has expanded rapidly in contexts of weak regulation, with direct implications for access, affordability and the quality of essential services. Second, how can large corporate actors that wield significant market and political power across international borders, often with damaging social and environmental consequences, be held accountable to citizens and contribute to social development?

## Special events

### Climate change as a social development issue—Conference, 2011

It is increasingly clear that neglect of the social pillar of the sustainable development agenda undermines the possibility of achieving its objectives. Furthermore, without a strong social focus, policies for addressing climate change or new initiatives around the green economy or green growth will fail to deliver development that is inclusive and sustainable. While the profound development implications of climate change are now well accepted, the major challenge remains to frame the climate change debate as one in which equity, human needs and security are central. This involves a shift from the dominant discourse that defines expertise, institutional location and possible solutions in scientific and technical terms, to one in which alternative and sustainable futures are built on individual and community capacities to create change. Appropriate policies for social development must be an integral component of such alternatives. A new initiative on the social dimensions of sustainable development and green economy will lead to a conference and outputs that inform the agenda for Rio+20, while also creating new research networks and defining an agenda for future research.

### A social development agenda for the G20—Research and civil society events 2010–2012

The Seoul Summit in 2010 was the first to place development issues prominently on the G20 agenda. Building on activities organized by UNRISD around the G20 process in Seoul, UNRISD is maintaining its involvement with research and civil society organizations with the goal of creating space for a discussion of social development goals within a reconstituted international development architecture. Prominent issues for research and policy advocacy leading up to Paris in 2011 and Mexico in 2012 are universal social protection and innovative financing for social development.

### UNRISD 50th Anniversary, 2013—50 years of social development: Retrospect and prospect

Activities leading to a major publication and event in 2013 will highlight 50 years of social development research and its impact within and beyond the United Nations system. A series of events will bring together leading thinkers and new researchers to review research findings and lessons from the past, and to reflect on innovations and evidence that suggest new pathways for the coming decades.

## 5. Implementation and Influence

The process by which UNRISD undertakes its research is both a distinctive feature of the research itself and contributes significantly to its impact.

UNRISD has a core staff, currently numbering around 20 people, based in Geneva. This consists of research coordinators and researchers, publication and dissemination staff, and a small administrative support team.

Research projects are undertaken in partnership with an extensive network of researchers, including institutions and individuals from both the global North and South. This network, and in particular the research partnerships in the South, is one of UNRISD's main assets and gives a distinctive perspective to our research.

- It enables the institute to undertake multi-country studies that reflect the research priorities, questions and perspectives of diverse groups of scholars in different parts of the world.
- It provides opportunities for country and regional comparisons grounded in empirical work by local researchers.
- It enables research findings to feed into policy and advocacy processes at national and local levels through researchers working in their local environment.
- It enables the diverse perspectives of Southern researchers to reach a global audience through the convening power and global platform that UNRISD provides.

Networks and partnerships are an essential part of the research process, and strengthen the likelihood of local uptake and impact of the findings. They have other benefits as well. UNRISD projects create opportunities for sharing methodological perspectives and innovations, and for comparative research among Southern researchers from different countries and regions—thus strengthening capacity among the Southern social science research community. UNRISD provides a valued convening space for such researchers,

facilitating their access to forums of deliberation and decision making within the United Nations system, as well as to the Northern academic and development community through conferences and publications.

The purpose of UNRISD research ultimately is to inform academic and policy debates and influence development practice at local, national and global levels. Beyond the research process itself, and the partnerships with Southern networks, research findings are disseminated via various channels and mechanisms. These include personal involvement in relevant meetings; publication of academic books and journal articles, which aim to influence development thinking; reports synthesizing research and policy lessons on particular issues, often used as inputs into key United Nations events and processes; summaries of research and policy findings; and regular updates through the website and electronic newsletter.

The 2010–2014 research agenda and related activities are designed to inform and influence three specific processes in which the international development community will be engaging over the coming years. First, work on the social dimensions of sustainable development will feed into the preparatory process leading to UNCSD in 2012. Second, research will be used to support civil society advocacy around the G20 development agenda. And third, research that deepens our existing analysis of the policies that reduce poverty and inequality, leading to more equitable and sustainable development strategies, will be a critical input into shaping a post–MDG agenda for poverty eradication.

## Annex: UNRISD Research Themes, Topics and Events, 2010–2014\*

Key themes	Topics and events
<b>Social Policies for Inclusive Development</b> <i>Work in progress 2010–2011</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal Economy, Social Policy and Gender</li> <li>• South-South Migration, Social Policy and Development</li> <li>• Migration and Health in China</li> <li>• Universalizing Social Policy in a Development Context: The Case of the Republic of Korea</li> </ul>
<i>Projects being developed 2011–2012</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financing Social Policy in Times of Crisis</li> <li>• Macroeconomic Policies, Public Spending and Social Development</li> <li>• Innovative Policy Alternatives for Social Development</li> </ul>
<b>Politics and Institutional Dynamics of Social Development</b> <i>Work in progress 2010–2011</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's Claims-Making</li> <li>• Regulation, Markets and Accountability</li> </ul>
<i>Projects being developed 2011–2012</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politics of Domestic Resource Mobilization</li> <li>• Participatory Institutions and Empowerment</li> <li>• Global Justice Activism in Times of Crisis</li> </ul>
<b>Special Events</b> 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate Change and Sustainable Social Development (scoping study, conference and publications)</li> </ul>
2011–2013 2012–2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Development Research and Advocacy for the G20</li> <li>• 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Events</li> </ul>

\* UNRISD must raise funds to implement research on the above topics and events. In this respect, it should be noted that UNRISD is funded exclusively by voluntary contributions from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations and United Nations agencies.



UNRISD was established in 1963 as an autonomous space within the UN system for the conduct of policy-relevant, cutting-edge research on social development that is pertinent to the work of the United Nations Secretariat; regional commissions and specialized agencies; and national institutions.

Our mission is to generate knowledge and articulate policy alternatives on contemporary social development issues, thereby contributing to the broader goals of the UN system of reducing poverty and inequality, advancing well-being and rights, and creating more democratic and just societies.