UNRISD Institutional Strategy 2021–2025

Consultation Document, Version 1.2

3 July 2020

Contents

Towards the UNRISD Institutional Strategy 2021-2025

UNRISD's current institutional strategy, [Transformations to Equity and Sustainability](), which covers the period 2016-2020:

- Analyses the global context in which UNRISD's work will take place, highlighting inequalities, conflict and unsustainable practices as three overarching contemporary development challenges.
- Sets out three research programmes—social policy, gender, and the social dimensions of sustainable development—and an analytical framework that ensures attention to inclusion, institutions, intersections and innovation.
- Outlines the Institute's commitment to communicating research so that it effects change.
- Describes the co-production process through which UNRISD engages with its network and partners.
- Sets out the results expected from the strategy and its activities.

This document aims to provide the basis for a discussion with the Institute's stakeholders—its Board, research networks, donor partners, UN counterparts and in civil society—on UNRISD's next institutional strategy that will cover the period 2021–2025.

It proposes a process of strategy development and consultation that will take place between April and October 2020, and some initial thoughts on framing and content. The purpose of this process is to design a strategic framework that is responsive to key global development concerns in the global South, innovative in terms of future challenges and priority policy issues, agile and effective in terms of communications, and sustainable with regard to funding.

UNRISD is committed to comprehensive consultation with its stakeholders on where its research activities are directed, as well as how UNRISD conducts and communicates about its research. Notwithstanding the unprecedented current global context because of the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be a number of opportunities throughout 2020 to elicit perspectives on UNRISD's next strategy. Full advantage will be taken of virtual means, as well as face-to-face meetings where possible. UNRISD will make particular efforts to reach out to its research network members, particularly in the global South, as well as its counterparts in universities, think tanks, NGOs, foundations and the UN system.

Key dates for the process in 2020 include:

April:	UNRISD Board session
May-June:	Revision of consultation document and online survey
July:	Publication of consultation document and launch of online survey
July-August:	Online survey and consultations
September:	First draft of strategy and stakeholder meeting
September-October:	UNRISD staff retreat (tbc)
October:	Final consultation with Board
November:	Publication of Institutional Strategy 2021-2025

Evolving UNRISD's Strategy

The development of a new institutional and research strategy every five years provides an opportunity to step back and reassess how UNRISD's research, events and communications are adding value to the development community in terms of analysis of priority issues and agenda-setting, filling gaps where others may not be working, providing an effective bridge from the research community to the United Nations, and influencing policy and operations of organizations committed to social development. The context for our work shifts around us, often gradually but sometimes rapidly, and priorities shift in our research networks, within communities affected by development challenges, and with our other development partners.

That said, UNRISD typically does not start with a blank sheet when contemplating what the next institutional strategy should contain. We have programme and project commitments that transcend the end of a past strategy and the beginning of a new one, we have a legacy of research in certain areas that becomes an important asset for the Institute, and, most importantly, we have a set of skills and knowledge that sits within UNRISD's most important resource—its staff and research networks.

The development of a new strategy therefore represents an important opportunity for adjustment, evolution and innovation, if not always a radical change in direction.

Contextual Considerations

UNRISD's current strategy emphasizes inequalities, conflict and unsustainable practices as overarching contemporary development challenges on which UNRISD's activities can contribute to responses. These are challenges to development that persist today.

The economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to be felt through the duration of the new strategy. Unemployment in many countries has already started to rise, as have debt burdens; government budgets are under pressure because of lower tax receipts; and the prospects for economic and social development—and the realization of the 2030 Agenda—are being undermined. The pandemic has also shone a harsh light on a wider malaise in public policy and private behaviour, as well as deep structural challenges. Unilateral responses to the crisis may exacerbate inequalities further, while societies are already struggling to adapt to the shifting tectonic plates of global warming, demographic change, and the fast pace of technological development. The Covid-19 crisis has revealed how they are similarly unprepared and lack resilience when faced with large and urgent shocks, whether they relate to conflict and displacement, new disease vectors, climate disruptions and extreme weather events, or natural disasters.

Economic incentives at all levels—global, country, firm and individual—have become more focused on extracting maximum value from economic processes rather than investing in strengthening systems for the future. This dynamic has been further exacerbated by injustice in relation to the distribution of that economic value—across countries, within societies, and intergenerationally. Many countries have low human, infrastructural and financial capacities in their public institutions and services, exacerbated by a decade of austerity and recovery from the global economic and financial crisis. And rewards from private sector activity in an increasingly financialized world have continued to flow to those who own or allocate capital, and away from workers who face increasingly precarious forms of employment. The impacts of the novel coronavirus have laid bare structural weaknesses in essential organizations and services, and systemic issues with how we govern economic behaviour.

Globalization has woven countries together and reinforced their interdependence. But as economic and political gravity has shifted in the world, some industrialized countries have responded with nationalist policies, disrupting cooperation on trade, migration, and actions necessary to safeguard the planet. This has restricted the ability of societies to respond to new and old challenges for the benefit of all, at a time when countries with fewer resources and less capacity urgently need solidarity and support. It will be important that the current pandemic does not amplify inward looking policies, but instead reinforces cooperation. In an interlinked world, no one is protected until all are protected.

The technological landscape has evolved rapidly since UNRISD developed its last institutional strategy. New digital technologies have opened up additional avenues for service delivery and human progress, even though these opportunities are unevenly distributed across the world. They have allowed some countries in the global South to test and implement new models of social protection, financial services and the provision of education and health services. At the same time, the darker side of social media has allowed nationalist agendas to be pursued through (dis)information campaigns and the subversion of transparent democratic processes.

Such shifts, which have become more apparent since 2015, influence the direction of UNRISD's research activities. The continued existence of inequalities, and their widening in many instances, is central to not only the current pandemic but all the other challenges listed above. Strong economic growth in China and some other emerging economies signals some degree of economic convergence, although most continue to face poverty and distributional issues within their own countries. The story is one of continued divergence if these large emerging economies are excluded. There is therefore a real risk of inequalities within all countries and across all vertical and horizontal domains being further exacerbated.

An initial proposal therefore—*to be considered or shaped in this consultation process*—would be to focus the new strategy on research that can help governments and others to reduce inequalities—social, economic, environmental, and those relating to gender and other markers of social disadvantage—which necessarily entails exploring the power asymmetries that underpin inequalities in each of these dimensions. This would be applicable to all levels of governance and decision-making: global, national and local.

As a natural evolution of UNRISD's substantive focus, this framing would be fully aligned with the call of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to reduce inequalities and leave no one behind. The upholding by UNRISD of the full range of normative commitments that condition our home in the UN—including to human rights and social and environmental justice—would be reinforced; while placing the reduction of inequalities at the forefront of the Institute's strategic priorities for the next five years would both build on its intellectual legacy and confer a more readily communicable thematic focus. This would also be an opportunity for UNRISD to respond to requests from partners and UN organizations to provide support on how to strengthen the social inclusion and equality frameworks of their programmes.

Overcoming Inequalities: Towards a New Eco-Social Compact

In 2015, the international development community agreed on an ambitious agenda to "transform our world", with an unprecedented broad and transformative development vision enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agenda is a response to a challenging global context—one marked by disparate progress in reducing poverty; high and rising levels of wealth and income inequality; the persistence of other multidimensional inequalities, including gendered forms; climate change and environmental destruction; insecurity and conflict; migration; precarious work; as well as accelerating demographic and technological

change—all of which challenge the capacity of policy makers to steer the course of development to the benefit of people and planet.

In this context, inequalities have emerged as a key cross-cutting issue, largely perceived as a threat to the realization of the sustainable development vision if not reduced over the coming years. The commitment to reduce inequalities is manifested not just in Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10, but also in the promise to "leave no one behind". Inequalities are catalysed by elite capture of economic and political power, a reinforcing process that compounds inequalities, which—in various dimensions—undermine social, environmental and economic sustainability, and fuel poverty, insecurity, crime and xenophobia.

The impact of inequalities tends to affect those who are already marginalized or discriminated against, particularly children and women living in poverty, people with disabilities, older persons, refugees and migrants, indigenous peoples, and people in other minority groups—whether because of the colour of one's skin, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Five years into the 2030 Agenda, the Covid-19 pandemic has now exposed and exacerbated these inequalities and their corrosive effects. Despite the urgency to act, it is far from clear that decisive and effective actions to reduce inequalities are being enacted.

In its new institutional strategy, UNRISD would aim to respond directly to this urgent challenge by putting the inequality predicament at the centre of its research and activities. Using political economy analysis to get to the heart of power relations that create or sustain inequalities, and an intersectional approach, we would focus on analysis of root causes of vertical and horizontal inequalities; their economic, social and environmental impacts; as well as ways to overcome them, in terms of promoting equality-enhancing policies and institutions, and nurturing progressive political alliances that lobby for change.

The overall framing around inequalities pursues several objectives: to address one of today's greatest challenges, which obstructs poverty reduction and sustainable development, while zooming in on neglected or sensitive issues such as political drivers of inequalities and elite power; to provide a coherent framework for the work programme and its sub-components, creating a critical mass of relevant evidence and analysis for policy makers, the UN and civil society; and to strengthen UNRISD's profile and visibility by building on our track record of work on inequality, which has made a mark on development debates and present agendas.

Within this programme focused on inequalities, UNRISD would work together with researchers and progressive alliances, particularly in the global South, to co-create the evidence needed to push for a more equitable and inclusive eco-social compact fit for the 21st century and beyond. By producing evidence-based knowledge about the drivers and consequences of inequalities, and by unpacking the political obstacles to policies and investments that will redress inequalities and realize the objective of "leaving no one behind", the research will contribute to building more inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies. UNRISD will also strengthen the capacity of policy makers, partners and the UN family to address inequalities through the provision of policy recommendations and contribution to capacity development initiatives.
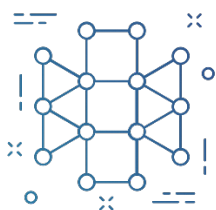
Programme Level

There is some degree of natural path dependency in evolving the activities underneath this headline narrative on inequalities and the need for a new eco-social compact. UNRISD's three current programme areas—Social Policy, Sustainable Development, and Gender—are the starting point for the proposed programme of work.

However, given the formation of two distinct areas of work under the Social Dimensions of Sustainable Development programme it is proposed that this now be separated into two.

In each research area, more emphasis will be placed on inequality dynamics, including those related to gender. This approach is consistent with UNRISD's definition of transformative change arising from previous research and explored in the Flagship Report, *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

It is proposed that UNRISD research therefore be organized under the following programme areas, plus a programme led from Bonn focused on research-to-policy uptake for SDG implementation.

● *Social Policy and Development*

Social policy is and will be crucial in the process of implementing and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic. In a development context, social policy plays crucial roles for production, reproduction and redistribution, in addition to protecting people against life and market risks. The increase in inequality and social exclusion, and the growing divide between the wealthy and powerful and the rest, create new challenges for social policy and its financing, in particular where state provisioning has been weakened, public services dismantled and social policy targeted to the extreme poor, unravelling previous or incipient social contracts. The Social Policy and Development programme will continue to combine work on innovative and transformative policy approaches, which show a potential to address the root causes of poverty and inequality, as well as policy, institutional and political analyses at national, regional and global levels. It will focus on the role of social policy to address the inequalities that have been exposed even more starkly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic—those related to class, gender, age, disability, location, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, migration or refugee status—as well as institutions and norms shaping policy design, implementation and outcomes. The programme aims to address key questions about the factors driving social policy reforms, expansion or retrenchment in different contexts in the global South; what role social policies play in overcoming (or reinforcing) inequalities and social exclusion and promoting inclusive development paths; and how to build a new eco-social compact.

● *Gender Justice and Development*

Gender inequality, discrimination and violence affect all countries around the world and are major obstacles to equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. Despite progress the problems are pervasive, and in many contexts reversals in previous gains are occurring. The enforced lockdowns across the world in response to Covid-19 have led to a significant rise in domestic abuse and violence, and the burden of domestic and care work, both paid and unpaid, has fallen disproportionately on women. The Gender Justice and Development programme will focus on the structures and the relations that underpin unequal gendered outcomes and their structural drivers, with a focus on intersecting inequalities that tend to accumulate disadvantages for specific groups of women (for example, older women, ethnic, religious or sexual minority women, women with disabilities, or women working in the informal sector) in economic, political and social terms. A scoping and consultation process carried out in late 2019 and early 2020 identified three key research themes to be explored over the coming years: (i) feminist perspectives on climate change; (ii) gender, technologies and digital economies; and (iii) anti-genderism and global governance.

● *Social and Solidarity Economy*

Social and solidarity economy is an integrative, people-centred and often planet-sensitive approach that puts sustainable development at the centre of its activities. It is a powerful approach to achieve the SDGs, reduce inequalities and help shape a new eco-social compact. Its potential and impact have been evident in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. SSE is based upon principles and practices of participatory cooperation, solidarity, collective action, distribution of benefits and democratic self-governance. Realization of the potential of SSE as a means of implementation of the SDGs demands enabling institutional and policy environments for scaling up SSE activities in ways that allow them to expand while not deviating from their core values and objectives. Through several research projects in its portfolio of work on SSE, UNRISD is assessing the

institutional and policy environments for SSE at global, regional, national and local levels, and exploring and measuring the different ways SSE and other business actors are contributing to the implementation and achievement of the SDGs.

● *Climate Justice*

The climate crisis is not only an environmental crisis but an economic and social justice crisis that requires a different approach to policy making and practice. The economic activities that provide employment and deliver goods and services must also be compatible with achieving social equity and environmental sustainability. Such an eco-social approach promotes policies that decarbonize the economy and protect people from the unavoidable impacts of climate change while addressing existing inequalities and questions of justice. This programme builds on the framing of eco-social policies introduced by UNRISD in the Flagship Report, *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change*. It recognizes climate and environmental degradation as political and as rights issues that need to be assessed and addressed in terms of their justice outcomes. The programme will continue to look at questions of equity and justice both in terms of climate change mitigation and the transition to a low-carbon world that could potentially be accelerated as we adjust to a post-Covid-19 world, as well as climate change adaptation and the loss and damage because of the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

● *Integrating Knowledge and Capacity Development for the SDGs (Bonn programme)*

This work programme aims to maximize the use and influence of UNRISD research, from all programme areas, for integrated policies for fair and sustainable development. Focused on the social dimensions of sustainable development, the programme fosters the uptake of cutting-edge research in training and policy making, by collaborating with diverse development actors. The programme, led from the UN Sustainability Hub in Bonn, has three main objectives: (i) strengthen the Bonn ecosystem through an integrated approach to knowledge and skills development on the social dimensions of sustainable development; (ii) elaborate joint research and capacity development strategies through identifying and mapping relevant knowledge gaps and then implementing corresponding research activities; and (iii) strengthen evidence-based SDG implementation and research uptake by UN and development partners, in particular through enhanced collaboration with partner organizations in Bonn.

Taken together, these programme areas reflect elements of continuity and build on the Institute's global track-record of high-quality, relevant and credible research in the respective fields.

Communications and Outreach

The new institutional strategy will reflect on the changing communications context, and how UNRISD will continue to evolve its communications strategy and outputs to remain a trusted and reliable source of information, and hence an effective contributor of research and policy analysis. Subject to resources being available, the time period covered by the next institutional strategy should also see a redesign of UNRISD's website. This could in turn support more online consultation practices with our network, equalizing opportunities to engage with UNRISD and the UN more generally.
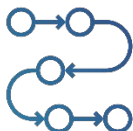
How We Do Our Research

The previous institutional strategy set out how UNRISD sees "pathways to transformation" as a result of its policy-engaged research process. This approach, based on co-production and policy/praxis engagement, has stood the test of time, and will be reinforced further by the new programme focused on research uptake led from the Bonn office. UNRISD will continue to explore new partnerships to strengthen its operations, policy analysis and uptake.

At the same time, there have been shifts in the discourse and practice of research ethics. In the next strategy period, UNRISD will develop and publish a framework for how the Institute will maintain the highest ethical standards as it pursues its mission.

UNRISD will continue to keep under review—and improve where necessary—diversity within the Institute, its Board, and its research network.

Key Questions for Our Stakeholders and Network

1. Do current trends at global, national and local levels reinforce or question UNRISD's proposed activities?

2. Is an overall framing of "Overcoming Inequalities: Towards a New Eco-Social Compact" the right one? What would be in an eco-social compact? If not, what alternative framings would advance UNRISD's research?

3. Are the proposed programme areas broadly the right ones? If not, what is missing?

4. How can we further strengthen UNRISD's contributions to research uptake and capacity building, particularly with partners in the global South?

5. Are there additional partners that UNRISD could work with to strengthen its policy analysis and uptake?

6. How can UNRISD further strengthen its approach to communications and outreach?

7. Are changes needed to the way that UNRISD conducts its research and other activities?

8. In the current context, how can UNRISD strengthen its approaches to fundraising and partnerships?

Take the survey