



UNRISD

United Nations Research Institute
for Social Development

2000 +

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A Vision
for the Future
of the Institute

Identity

Civil Society

Democracy

Technology

Human Rights

Cohesion

UNRISD 2000+

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for the Future
of the Institute



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Research Institute
for Social Development

UNRISD thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.

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Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, new approaches to economic and social development are urgently needed. The world is changing rapidly, for better and for worse. Great fortunes grow side by side with destitution. A volatile and increasingly interdependent world economy lurches from one speculative crisis to another, and in many societies there is a growing atmosphere of insecurity and violence.

Yet possibilities for social progress are enormous. There is no technical reason, for example, why hunger and poverty should not be eradicated. Nor is there any technical reason why remarkable advances in medical science should not greatly improve the health and well-being of people around the world. Economic and political obstacles to realizing these goals are legion. But a revolution in information technology is greatly increasing the opportunity for transnational co-operation, including the formation of alliances in support of social initiatives.

The quality of social research will play a significant role in determining whether the lives of most people improve or deteriorate in the years to come. Public policy and private initiatives to bring about constructive change must be supported not only by reliable information on social trends and rigorous analysis of available options, but also by debates that stimulate new visions of the human condition. Conventional wisdom is insufficient for generating solutions to the unconventional problems of a rapidly changing world.

This is a time for questioning—questioning the assumptions underlying current models of development, the concepts used to construct these models, and the methodologies that have been chosen to generate basic social and economic information. It is a time for constructing alternative scenarios. New links must be made between the physical and social sciences. A more productive dialogue must be promoted between economics and related disciplines. And a much more decisive voice in the development debate must be given to scholars and activists in developing countries, whose knowledge is not systematically used.

Work at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) during the next five years will contribute to a process of renovation in the field of international development research. The Institute will take advantage of its unusual position—at the intersection between international organizations, civil society and the academic community—to open new spaces for creativity and dialogue, and to encourage better circulation of ideas in the international community and beyond.

The UNRISD Mandate and Network

UNRISD is an autonomous research institute within the United Nations system. It is associated with no single specialized agency, it is restricted to no narrow field of concern, and its work is not bound by the bureaucratic or political constraints that frequently characterize many inter-governmental agencies. The Institute enjoys real independence in defining research questions, deciding on methodology, selecting researchers, drawing conclusions and publishing results.

Funded entirely by voluntary contributions, UNRISD is in a position to take up and discuss central problems of contemporary social development, even when such issues are too controversial to be addressed by most international organizations. At the same time, its research programmes can systematically draw on the knowledge of many kinds of people, including scholars, activists, government officials, agency personnel and local community residents. The capability to form broad networks across regions and disciplines is one of the hallmarks of UNRISD work.

The UNRISD mandate

The mandate of the Institute, as put forward in a 1963 Bulletin of the United Nations Secretary-General, is to conduct policy-relevant research on pressing issues of social development. These issues encompass three distinct, but closely related, processes: improvement in *social relations*, improvement in *social institutions* for the management of collective concerns, and improvement in *social welfare*.

These processes are both means and ends. As ends, they provide a measuring rod for judging success in translating material progress into social improvement. They can help to identify instances in which the social costs of certain economic development strategies are either too high or are unevenly borne by different social groups and generations.

Processes of social development can also be seen in an instrumentalist fashion, as means. Economists have recognized for some time that certain forms of social consumption should be considered as social investment, and thus as instruments for accelerating economic growth. In recent years, endogenous growth theories (which include institutional and political variables) have further bolstered this instrumentalist view of social development. Notions such as “social capability” and “social capital” reflect a growing desire to create or strengthen the institutions and social relations that facilitate productive economic activity.

While social development does have an important role in improving economic performance, it is important that social improvement not be relegated to second place in the development discourse—or worse yet, become the object of bureaucratic social engineering. This is a recurring danger. In fact, UNRISD was established precisely to signal dissatisfaction on the part of many development thinkers with the tendency to treat social issues as subsidiary to economic ones.

Underlying values and concerns

As a UN agency, UNRISD has always based its work on development values enunciated in the United Nations Charter, as well as in various international declarations and resolutions. Two central values of social development are expressed repeatedly in these documents: that every human being has a right to a decent livelihood and that all people should be allowed to participate on equal terms in decisions that affect their lives. Over the years, UNRISD research has been guided by these two core values. Ironically, however, the fact that so many governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have claimed to adhere to these principles has made them seem commonplace. The challenge for research is thus not only to

reinforce their substantive content and assist in their operationalization, but also to highlight the extent of real adherence to them.

At the same time, the United Nations has become more explicit about the social and institutional arrangements required to promote its core values. Livelihood issues—especially questions of poverty, inequity and economic development—continue to be a central preoccupation. But there is new attention to the environmental sustainability of the strategies and policies designed to address such issues. Respect for human rights and a commitment to democratization have also been forcefully emphasized in recent years. And concern with gender equality has become an integral part of the development agenda.

All research at UNRISD takes these basic elements of the international agenda into account. Poverty eradication, the promotion of democracy and human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability are overarching concerns of every programme. So is the rapidly advancing process of globalization, which constitutes one of the defining parameters for social development at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Increasing economic interdependence and the formation of supranational identities create new challenges, of relevance to virtually every area of social development research. The global brief of UNRISD—its role in forming cross-cultural and cross-national research networks, and its commitment to encourage understanding of the international policy context for development—gives added importance to the analysis of globalization throughout the work of the Institute.

UNRISD and the research community

A striking feature of development research and policy making is the gap between what is known in universities and research centres about basic problems and processes of social change, on one hand, and the capacity of policy makers to gain access to this information, on the other. UNRISD serves as a conduit of knowledge from sites where it is generated to sites where it may be used. To carry out this function, it maintains close ties with the research community, where it benefits from considerable respect and goodwill.

The Institute's research staff organizes and conducts projects through networks involving national researchers in many parts of the world. In the past, much of this collaboration was with individuals or local institutions, chosen for their knowledge of particular issues and included in research networks for the duration of specific UNRISD projects. But in future an effort will also be made to strengthen relations with thematically or regionally specific research networks operating on a long-term basis, such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO) and the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI). This will facilitate Institute access to ongoing research in developing countries, as well as improving dissemination—both from developing countries to the global community and from UNRISD programmes to the developing world. A series of regional roundtables on the social sciences and social issues in development, scheduled at regular intervals, will forge further institutional links between UNRISD and other research networks.

Building capacity to address global social issues

UNRISD brings high-level scholars and experts into its research networks. While the Institute is not primarily dedicated to training, it does have a strong comparative advantage in strengthening the overall capacity of the international research community to deal with social development issues in a rapidly globalizing world. The Institute's participation in global research networks, and in wider development networks, makes a contribution in this regard.

In future UNRISD will support the growing number of initiatives in developed countries to internationalize social science training and research, offering when possible its unique institutional setting at the United Nations in Geneva to visiting faculty and students. To reverse the current tendency for the conceptualization of a global agenda to be carried out almost exclusively in the North, it is also necessary to encourage research institutions in the South to internationalize some of their activities and to develop capacities for addressing global issues from global, national and regional perspectives.

The Institute has for a number of years sponsored an internship programme, which provides a limited number of outstanding graduate students from around the world with the opportunity to gain experience in an international research setting. This programme should be better funded so that an adequate stipend can be offered to talented candidates from developing countries. During the next few years, UNRISD will seek to establish a fellowship programme, bringing professional researchers to Geneva for extended periods to contribute to Institute projects. For younger participants, the benefits of being in Geneva will be maximized through contacts with other international organizations whose activities are related to social development.

The interface between research and policy

UNRISD has a brief to conduct policy-relevant research. It must produce results that are academically sound and also address the concerns of policy makers, including both governmental and non-governmental institutions and actors. This presents a double challenge. If the Institute is to attract the best scholars and thinkers, it must provide an environment conducive to independent and creative work. At the same time, if policy makers are to take UNRISD research seriously, the Institute must clearly be sensitive to their need for coherent information that assists them in day-to-day decision making.

The usual relationship between social scientists and development practitioners is often ambivalent, and at times conflictive. Academics often dismiss policy makers' understanding of social problems because the latter seem insufficiently aware of the complexity of certain issues. Policy makers, in turn, dismiss researchers' work as "academic", since it often does not meet practical needs for replicability of project design, stable decision-making frameworks, or quick analysis of the specifics of each case in which action must be taken. The practitioners' solution is often to rely on consultants, guided by specific terms of reference. Academics may feel that such a narrow focus can produce misleading information for policy makers.

Navigating such uncertain waters is not easy. Whenever appropriate, the Institute will ensure that there is adequate dialogue between policy makers and social scientists before research gets

under way. Officials concerned with key policy questions will be included in pre-project seminars, so that their input is taken into account from the beginning of the research effort. This not only improves researchers' knowledge, but also commits policy makers sufficiently to the research process to ensure that they take into account the findings of research teams.

UNRISD and the UN system

The policy relevance of the Institute is clearly related to its position within the UN system. The Director of UNRISD (appointed by the Secretary-General) serves on a number of system-wide committees, including the high-level Executive Committee on Economic and Social Development, and on advisory committees such as the External Research Advisory Committee of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Task Force on Health and Development. UNRISD staff members also participate in some of these committees, including (at various times) the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Task Force on Rural Development, the ACC Sub-committee on Nutrition, and the High-Level Co-ordinating Group on the Effects of Structural Adjustment. They make presentations at hearings, such as those of the Human Rights Commission. They give seminars in training courses like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Advanced Workshop for Experienced Resident Representatives. And they contribute to assessments of certain programmes, such as the International Child Development Centre of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in Florence.

The Institute sometimes develops large cross-national research projects at the request of UN organizations. Major UNRISD networks on food systems and society, and on technical co-operation and women's lives, are two past examples of this kind of collaboration. In addition, the Institute organizes joint conferences with other UN agencies and, during the 1990s, made a special effort to contribute to such global events as the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Other policy actors

While recognizing the primacy of United Nations concerns in guiding UNRISD research, the Institute—perhaps more than any other UN organization—has always been sensitive to the fact that the policy community extends far beyond the limits of the multilateral system. Consequently, UNRISD has aimed at reaching as broad a spectrum of actors as possible.

Since 1990, UNRISD staff have advised some 20 bilateral agencies and national governments on particular areas of social development. The Institute regularly sends research reports and books to interested officials of development agencies and benefits from the presence of many of these officials at UNRISD conferences and seminars. It has organized research projects at the request of bilateral agencies, as in 1993 when the Danish International Development Committee (DANIDA) suggested the need for an in-depth look at vulnerability and coping strategies among various groups in post-conflict Cambodia.

UNRISD has also engaged in long-term dialogue with the NGO communities of the North and the South. Community activists and knowledgeable members of Southern NGOs are often

consulted about, or involved in, specific Institute research programmes. Staff of the Institute are also frequent speakers at NGO meetings, where they present UNRISD research findings and discuss related policy issues.

In summary, the Institute aims to serve as a UN window on the world of research and policy debates in different cultures and societies, and as a door through which the results of national and local research gain access to the international system.

Recent Research at UNRISD

Participation in the official and unofficial networks that make up the international development community provides UNRISD with up-to-date knowledge of social and economic trends. This kind of involvement also plays a central role in identifying areas in which new work is needed, and in which UNRISD can make a useful contribution. The broad outlines of the research programme to be implemented over the period 2000–2005 have been shaped by such contacts, by the underlying values and concerns of the Institute, and by findings from research carried out during the past decade. Before setting out the new programme in detail, it is therefore useful to explain what recent UNRISD work has been about.

The groundswell of ethnic hatred that marked our world in the late 1980s and early 1990s formed the background for a series of research efforts at the Institute that have given it a strong capacity to analyse issues of ethnic conflict. Three projects were especially important in this regard. The first, on *ethnic conflict and development*, explored the causes, processes and consequences of this phenomenon in 10 countries. The second, on *ethnic diversity and public policy*, focused on policies to resolve ethnic conflicts and promote successful accommodation in plural societies. The third, dealing with *political violence and social movements*, probed the discourse of social movements (for example Shining Path, ETA or the IRA) that have used violence to pursue political goals. These projects culminated in 1994 in a major international conference on ethnic violence, conflict resolution and cultural pluralism, which was organized as part of the preparatory meetings for the World Summit for Social Development.

During the first half of the 1990s, UNRISD also carried out a number of studies on *crisis, adjustment and social change*, to improve understanding of the social and political implications of recession and structural adjustment. On one hand, this was an exploration of changing livelihood strategies in certain parts of Africa and Latin America; on the other, it was an attempt to analyse the politics of economic reform. The project quickly spawned related subprojects dealing more specifically with the social policy dimensions of free-market reform. The great difficulties inherent in the turn toward residualism in social policy—with its reliance on targeting and social safety nets—were carefully documented in a project on *economic restructuring and new social policies*, which generated important inputs for the Social Summit. The trend toward growing selectivity in social policy was examined in a companion project on the *future of the welfare state*, which explained a number of welfare models in the industrialized

world and highlighted the great diversity of responses to the contemporary challenge of economic globalization.

In addition, UNRISD has made a useful contribution in the field of *sustainable development*, largely through its insistence on understanding the role of specific actors and institutions in environmental protection and degradation. While dominant approaches addressed trade-offs between economic growth and destruction of the natural environment, proponents of sustainable development were often slow to explore the patterns of social relations influencing specific environmental policies and outcomes in different political and cultural settings. Therefore in each of the 10 projects on socio-environmental issues carried out between 1988 and 1997, an effort was made to examine the underlying (social, political, economic and natural) causes of environmental decline, as well as the broader changes in policy and institutional structures that would be required to promote a socially conscious form of sustainable development.

In the field of environmental protection, as in many others, there is often special emphasis on promoting the participation of local groups affected by degradation of the natural resource base. In practice, this frequently involves an effort, directed from above, to draw local people into development projects of one kind or another. Nevertheless, a number of UNRISD studies have shown that there are dangers in this approach: the drive by many agencies to promote participation has often resulted in situations where community groups are overwhelmed by external agents, conflicting agendas and diverse discourses. Research in the area of *urban governance* provided considerable evidence that small community organizations, with precarious funding and limited information or skills, should not be expected to assume the responsibilities of the state, or meet basic needs previously within its purview.

One of the basic problems that arises in uncritical discourse on participation is the tendency to place great faith in a vaguely understood and undifferentiated “civil society”. This glosses over important differences in organization and goals between NGOs, grassroots organizations and social movements, as well as ignoring an array of problems inherent in local politics and social relations. Case studies carried out in the UNRISD project on *technical co-operation and women’s lives* showed that gender (and class) politics at the grassroots level tend to constrain the ability of women—poor women in particular—to express their needs and interests in public, and especially in group situations. This research also drew attention to tensions arising between leadership and members in grassroots women’s organizations over the relative importance of advocacy work and more practical interventions to meet immediate needs.

More generally, research at the Institute on *integrating gender into development policy* has explored the difficulties inherent in mainstreaming gender analysis and gender awareness in different kinds of institutions, in distinct political and cultural environments. The project has also encouraged dialogue on approaches to macroeconomic theory and policy that could adequately reflect the position and needs of women.

Throughout the past decade, UNRISD sought to play a role not only in sponsoring research, but also in providing opportunities for more open-ended discussion of macro-theoretical issues in the field of development. Thus in 1995 the Institute invited 10 outstanding social thinkers to address a public conference on *rethinking social development*, held in Copenhagen during the final days of the Social Summit. And in 1996, UNRISD organized a pathbreaking conference on *globalization and citizenship* that posed necessary questions about the future of citizenship (at local, national, regional and international levels) during an age of global economic and social integration.

The Institute has also provided a space for experimental work in the field of post-conflict reconstruction and development. From 1994 through 1998, it was the home of the *War-torn Societies Project*, which used research as a tool for drawing representatives of opposing factions into a common endeavour: the identification and study of pressing local problems, leading to proposals for remedial action. This project generated a great deal of interest in the international community and served as a forum for discussion on new ways to conceptualize and implement strategies for integrated international assistance in post-conflict situations.

Finally, since 1995 UNRISD has sponsored a number of reports, seminars and conferences designed to support the follow-up to the Social Summit and the Fourth World Conference on Women. *States of Disarray*, the Institute report for the Social Summit, wove findings from many of the research areas mentioned above into a survey of the social effects of globalization.

Looking Toward the Future

The research programme for the next five years will draw on some of the institutional strengths of UNRISD—its networks and expertise on certain subjects, as well as the insights generated by its recent research—to create new possibilities for confronting serious challenges of contemporary world development. Areas in which UNRISD can make the most significant contribution to knowledge on social development during the period 2000–2005—and in which it has a comparative advantage—have been discussed in a number of fora, including a meeting of 25 social scientists from eight regions (Africa, East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Western Europe), organized specifically for this purpose. These areas have also been discussed by the Institute’s Board and have been reviewed by its core funders.

As a result of this process of consultation, UNRISD has adopted a new way of organizing its work. Five broad programme areas have been established, dealing with *Social Policy and Development*; *Democracy and Human Rights*; *Identities, Conflict and Cohesion*; *Civil Society and Social Movements*; and *Technology and Society*. In each of these areas, a number of research projects and dialogues will be developed. Ideas for a first set of projects are provided below, and there is room in each programme area for other projects to be proposed. This flexibility should make it easier for the Institute to respond to important opportunities and to incorporate new thinking into its work.

Social policy and development

UNRISD defines social policy broadly, as state policies, practices and institutions that directly influence the welfare and security of various groups within a particular society. Not all elements of social policy need be explicitly expressed. For example, social policy may be embedded in economic policy, when the latter has intended welfare consequences or reflects implicit or explicit socioeconomic priorities, such as reducing politically unacceptable levels of unemployment. Nevertheless, some elements of social policy are more explicit, such as direct government provision for social welfare, in part through broad-based public services and subsidies. Social policy also covers income policy and social security systems, including pension schemes.

In recent years the economic context for social welfare has changed markedly, in conjunction with a turn toward free-market policy. This has occurred in tandem with a number of critical changes in the conception of social policy. Social sector reform proposals emanating from the multilateral lending agencies have emphasized a system of welfare provision that is decentralized, and that often involves NGOs or the commercial private sector, while the state plays a regulatory, purchasing and residual provider role. This stands in sharp contrast to the universalistic social policies that successfully reduced social divisions and led to massive poverty reduction in the industrialized world during the course of the twentieth century.

Changing social policies have immediate effects on people's ability to make a living. Over the longer term, they also influence the nature of social divisions and social relations, as well as the prospects for sustained economic development in any society. Therefore it is particularly important to evaluate recent trends in this field carefully, and to improve the quality of social analysis that underlies decisions on policy.

Social policy in a development context. To provide intellectual background for this effort, the Institute will encourage genuine interdisciplinary debate on the relation between social policy, social and political institutions, and economic development. As the shortcomings of the neoliberal model become increasingly apparent, economic thinking is evolving beyond a stylized free-market paradigm. New growth theories and new institutional economics now recognize that human capital, essential social institutions, and a certain degree of trust are critical to economic growth. The interdependence between political and social institutions, on one hand, and economic performance, on the other, is being re-emphasized; and an increasing number of economists accept the fact that social policy contains powerful instruments for economic development.

There is a danger, however, that this process may promote a simplistic absorption of concepts from economics into other social science disciplines, rather than an original and productive synthesis of insights from all fields of social research. It is important to UNRISD to provide an institutional setting in which development thinkers can construct new ways of looking at the world that integrate the insights of both economic and social theory in an original fashion.

Economic crisis and institutional reform. Another way to further understanding of the complex links between social policy, patterns of economic development, and changes in social and

political organization is to look closely at recent experiences of economic crisis and restructuring in various parts of the world. For example, events in Asia during 1997–1998 have stimulated considerable debate on the causes of the crisis (global versus local) and on its long-term implications for people’s livelihoods. Analysts have focused particularly on the institutional setting in which Asian countries promoted rapid growth and poverty reduction from the 1950s onward. But their recommendations for reform have often been based on only the most cursory understanding of the institutions associated with formerly successful East Asian development models.

In this case, as in others, it is important to engage in a serious and balanced analysis of the logic and evolution of institutions now in question, and to understand the social and economic functions they have fulfilled. What, for example, have been the weaknesses and strengths of institutions promoting an integrated national industrial policy? How have labour markets worked in different countries and contexts, and how inflexible have they really been? How has the provision of social security been associated with a range of institutions, deeply affected by economic crisis? Questions like these could be asked in many parts of the world, including Russia—embroiled as it is in a major financial crisis with extremely serious social and institutional ramifications—Central Asia and other areas of the former Soviet bloc in transition to new forms of economic and political organization.

Gender, poverty and well-being. In any such discussion, it is obviously essential to engage in gender analysis. The impact of economic change on women and men is often quite different, as is the access of each to productive resources, income and social benefits. Furthermore, the livelihood options of men and women vary markedly in different cultures, so that generalizations about gender disadvantage (or advantage) are likely to hold true in certain situations, but not in others. There is thus ample room for improvement in gender-differentiated research on major social policy issues in concrete national settings.

Poverty alleviation provides a case in point. Do men and women in particular villages or neighbourhoods slip into poverty in the same way, and for the same reasons? Or are the social mechanisms leading to poverty, and the escape routes out of destitution, structured somewhat differently in each case? Can it be assumed, as is often done, that policies that strengthen the position of poor men will have much the same impact on poor women? Does land reform, as an example, have different implications for men and women in certain local settings? Do various kinds of targeted assistance imply different outcomes for men and women? What kinds of social policy should accompany labour-intensive employment strategies, if the burden of work for women is not to become unmanageable? Addressing such questions can make an original, and highly practical, contribution to improving the social policy environment in developed and developing countries alike.

Democracy and human rights

It is surprising that although democracy and good governance constitute integral aspects of the enabling environment for social development (in its broadest sense), there is no UN agency involved in their systematic study. This is unfortunate, because promoting democratic reform

and institutional efficiency is a complex undertaking. Particularly in areas of the South where the influence of donors and multilateral financial institutions is strong, pressures for reform are often exercised in a piecemeal fashion, through many parts of the international system, without understanding the inconsistencies between specific initiatives or the unintended consequences that some elements of reform may imply. The gap between good intentions and detailed analysis of concrete institutions in specific countries is also visible in the field of human rights. Both national and international communities can therefore benefit from more systematic social research efforts in this area.

Technocratic policy making and democratization. A number of problems might merit attention. One arises from the interplay of efforts to promote technocratic modes of economic policy making, on one hand, and civic pressures for democratization, on the other. The tendency over the past decade to confine the discussion of economic policy to a restricted circle in the government would seem to have serious implications for democracy. In what ways, and to what extent, has this trend affected the social and economic agendas of political parties and civic groups? How has it affected the functioning of parliaments? What are the distributional issues involved in the promotion of both stable macroeconomic governance and democratization? Are technocratic styles of policy making able to build the political coalitions required for stable economic adjustment? Does democratization necessarily destabilize macroeconomic performance? Are there alternative ways of managing national economies that can facilitate the consolidation and growth of “new democracies”?

Public sector reform and crisis-ridden states. In a large number of countries, successful democratization quite clearly requires a range of institutional reforms. To uphold basic rules of political competition, there must be a stable and efficient public sector that enjoys the confidence of the populace. Yet this is often lacking; and in fact, a number of developing countries in transition to democracy are suffering serious crises of state capacity and governance. The capacity crisis is visible in weak fiscal systems, problems of administrative inefficiency, and erosion of incentive structures for staff motivation. The governance crisis involves the erosion of institutions and rules that encourage political actors and pressure groups to conduct politics through constitutional means, rather than resorting to violence. What are the causes of these crises, and what steps must be taken to resolve them? Are the “new public management reforms” an adequate means for improving the performance of the public sector in weak states? Can they improve the environment for transitions to democracy?

Devolving power to the local level: Case studies of decentralization. New research is equally necessary when considering the effectiveness of other prominent trends in public sector reform, such as decentralization. The global debate on decentralization has concentrated on macro-level issues, such as the extent to which the central government has devolved powers and responsibilities to lower levels of government. But what does decentralization mean further down the line, when local governments are expected to transfer decision-making powers to local communities and their organizations? What are the institutional and political requirements of this process? What

does it imply for the quality of service provision and for the likelihood that local democracy can be strengthened?

Mainstreaming human rights. Like the idea of decentralization, the concept of mainstreaming entered the development discourse in the 1990s without a great deal of critical scrutiny. It is easy to talk about mainstreaming human rights or mainstreaming gender without confronting concrete issues of implementation; and this can weaken extremely important initiatives in the field of social development. Thus it is necessary to admit that despite the growing strength of the human rights movement, there is still a gulf between the articulation of global human rights principles and their application in the majority of national settings. What are the most outstanding impediments in particular countries? What steps are currently being taken to mainstream human rights issues in national policy-making institutions—government agencies, parliaments, judiciaries—and police forces? Which issues are being mainstreamed in which institutions and why? How central are human rights issues in the activities of political parties and social movements in different societies?

Identities, conflict and cohesion

Every person has a range of identities that provide a sense of belonging and security. These identities are shaped by changing surroundings: they grow out of formal and informal learning, as well as prevailing structures of opportunity and reward. Each is built on a set of values and rules of behaviour that give structure and meaning to life. And each plays a part in determining patterns of conflict and co-operation within particular societies and nations.

The rapid reorganization of economies and societies occurring at the turn of the twenty-first century is associated with a web of shifting identities. Some of these, formed around a common language, religion or cultural history, have sparked particularly bloody conflict during recent years. But there are many other elements in the shifting terrain of identity. Women are developing new forms of solidarity, often on a transnational or transcultural level. New religious denominations and cults are springing up and old ones are adapting to changing times. Ideologies of hatred flourish among some groups, in both developed and developing countries; and their Web sites can be found in the same virtual space as networks that vehemently oppose such views.

During the coming years, UNRISD work on identity, which previously centred around the study of ethnic conflict, is likely to evolve in new directions. One area of concern may be the search by marginalized young people for new forms of identity and respect. Another could be the role of the concept of citizenship in the creation of tolerant pluralistic societies.

Conflicting identities of marginalized youth. Young people are faced with particularly difficult problems of identity in today's world. Patterns of economic modernization based on high unemployment, with low social spending, often exclude them from participation in the productive economy and the social mainstream. Although they are likely to consume some of the cultural products of globalization, they may have no real hope of constructing a viable future. Thus what they receive from global culture may be used for destructive, rather than

constructive, purposes. Excluded young people (and especially young men) are often drawn into gang warfare, drug trafficking and consumption, and civil wars—using the language, symbols and violence-inflicting products of globalization to pursue their goals. The subject of conflicting identities among marginalized young people (men and women, in urban and rural settings, in different parts of the world) deserves far more attention than it is currently receiving from researchers, and from the development community in general.

Pluralism and citizenship. Citizenship is a construct that explicitly superimposes a single, egalitarian political identity on the array of particularistic loyalties that is likely to exist in a population of any significant size. Whatever their beliefs and status in society, citizens are members of a political community with equal rights to influence the public agenda and equal obligations to abide by majority decisions. They commit themselves to work out differences in a context of tolerance and respect for “the other” that is ultimately created and enforced by the power of a legitimate state.

In a world characterized by extraordinary diversity and increasingly threatened by intolerance, the construction and strengthening of citizenship ranks high on the list of priorities for those who believe in democracy and the defence of human rights. Such an effort is the most needed and the most difficult to achieve in post-conflict situations, where ethnic, religious and/or ideological hatred have undermined the very foundations of civility. One need only think of the challenges thrown up by the recent strife in East Timor, Kosovo, or Sierra Leone to understand the challenge at hand.

Comparative research on pluralism, citizenship and political reconstruction could be extremely useful in this context. What lessons can be drawn from earlier efforts to create an institutional and ideational environment for citizenship? How is citizenship understood in different cultural settings? What are the implications of cross-national alliances for the concept of citizenship? Can supranational organizations reinforce the construction of citizenship at national and subnational levels? Work on such questions can also benefit from broader debates on the nature of civil society, as discussed below.

Civil society and social movements

The current view of social progress gives prominence to civil society, both as a means and as an end of development. Nevertheless it is important to generate a more detailed and realistic understanding of what civil society is, not only in concrete national settings but also at the level of the international community. This may be done in a number of ways.

Case studies in the construction of civil societies. One approach involves focusing on the actual construction of civil societies in countries in transition from long-standing authoritarian regimes, as well as in war-torn countries where it is necessary to rebuild the institutions of the state. How are spaces created for the participation of non-state actors, and how do the latter understand their relation to the state? What steps are being taken to create a constructive working relationship between people and government, and how are “public” and “private” delineated? Who champions the emergence of a “civil society” and what do they hope to attain?

Documenting specific struggles to create and define civil society would give substance to a debate that is frequently rhetorical and idealistic.

Evaluating donor initiatives. It might also be helpful to take up a number of donor initiatives that support the development of civil society, and to carry out case studies of actual interventions by key development institutions in particular country contexts. Some challenging questions can be posed to orient this research. If civil societies evolve in highly complex and specific ways, for example, to what extent can external agents engineer the development of a “strong civil society”? Does external engagement in this process distort local processes by introducing imported agendas? Is it important to distinguish between building civil society and strengthening organizations within it?

Building civil society appears to require the creation of an enabling environment for all civic action (for example, a supportive legal and regulatory framework). It also requires some form of coalition building, cross-society dialogue and civic participation in development planning. How far can external actors support these processes? What happens when external support systematically flows to the NGO sector in certain countries? Does this encourage a proliferation of such groups, and perhaps the fragmentation and weakening of grassroots political action? What does it imply for the reform of the state?

Comparative study of illustrative social movements. Another approach to understanding the potential for civic action in a range of countries around the world is to focus on a particularly important issue and then to document the kinds of mobilization and forms of organization that arise in relation to it. There are currently a growing number of social movements arising in response to an array of problems—old and new, local and transnational. There are highly significant mobilizations in favour of land reform, the rights of indigenous peoples, land title and public service provision in low-income urban areas, women’s rights, human rights, and labour standards and rights. Some involve relatively homogeneous groups and others unite people with a wide array of interests. Debtors’ movements in Latin America, for example, include small business owners, large farmers, middle-class homeowners with unpayable mortgages, and a significant segment of the working poor. The mobilization against secretive negotiation of a global Multilateral Agreement on Investment spans continents as well as classes.

Careful comparison of selected social movements can lend substance to the discussion of civil society by highlighting the importance of people’s local, national and international initiatives in setting political agendas, and by analysing the obstacles that arise in specific cases. Since there is a great deal of discussion at present about the composition and capabilities of a “transnational” or “global” civil society, UNRISD will systematically explore this concept as well. Can there be a global civil society without a global government? Who comprises global civil society and how do these individuals and organizations function? How do international NGOs deal with international organizations like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO)? What is their relationship with national NGOs and governments?

Local self-organization. Finally, this research area could move below international and national levels, and out of the realm of formal politics and policy making, to generate insights on civil society that spring from the study of various kinds of local self-organization. People around the world have devised grassroots strategies for protecting or improving their access to resources, income and services. In some cases, this is associated with specific projects of alternative development. Such efforts are congruent with broader trends in social and economic thinking that extol the virtues of bottom-up initiatives and independence from the state. Comparative studies of successful and unsuccessful initiatives in different political and cultural settings could improve the quality of debate in this field.

Technology and society

An outstanding characteristic of the twentieth century—and particularly of the last few decades—was the constantly accelerating pace of technological change. Although this development is often analysed in technical or economic terms, it is above all a social phenomenon. The central element in sustained technological change is not new scientific discoveries—which can, and do, occur quite regularly—but the congruence of new technical possibilities with the interests and capacities of influential social groups.

In market economies, where the uses of technology are heavily influenced by decisions made in private research institutions and companies, there is a constant tension between the desire of the private sector to maximize profits, and the expectation on the part of the public that new products and techniques will meet (perhaps less profitable) social needs. This gives rise to various forms of public regulation and to a continuing test of strength between public interest groups, the scientific research community and the corporations whose use of new technologies has direct effects on the economy, society and natural environment.

UNRISD work in this area draws on case studies and debates at national and international levels to explore ways of encouraging a more socially responsible use of science and technology in a number of fields, including information technology, biotechnology and genetic engineering. It also draws on broader studies of corporate responsibility, often generated in relation to social and environmental issues.

Information technologies and social development. Through melding the separate capabilities of telecommunications, computing and the media into a single new set of products and services, the information technology sector can—if the requisite resources are available—now instantaneously include the most diverse kinds of people in global networks ranging from the Internet to satellite-transmitted telephony and television. This is a capability with profound implications for social and economic organization. It can create extraordinary opportunities to improve the level of living and quality of life of people around the world, or it can exacerbate already serious problems of economic polarization and cultural conflict.

Although the development community is pinning great hopes on the positive potential of information technology, surprisingly little social science research is being conducted on concrete experiences in this field in developing countries. What are the technological and

institutional requirements for promoting an inclusive information society, rather than a world of information “haves” and “have nots”? To answer such a question, it is important to explain strategic policy options in such fields as telecommunications, computer services, education and rural electrification, and to explore the social and political conditions under which the new technologies become effective tools for the empowerment of various groups.

Although this effort must include local-level research, so that the relation between new information technologies and local needs and cultures can be understood, it is also essential to study national and international policy issues. The information technology industry is highly concentrated, and the multinational corporations that determine investment decisions are only partially regulated within national boundaries. Few would doubt that the current international regulatory system is inadequate to deal with a rapidly evolving technological environment.

Biotechnology and genetic engineering. The situation is even more complex in the fields of biotechnology and genetic engineering, where conflicts between business interests and social priorities are both inevitable and extremely difficult to resolve. Obviously, the fact that private individuals and companies can now patent the genes of human beings, plants and animals creates philosophical and practical problems of unprecedented dimensions. UNRISD could provide a multidisciplinary forum for discussing this issue and for conducting research on the economic and social dynamics of “bio-prospecting” and “bio-piracy”, particularly in Third World settings.

The Institute could also look at the potential and actual role of biotechnologies in improving the health of the majority of the world’s population, who have low incomes. What kinds of incentives could be created to shift a larger share of the resources and effort of major pharmaceutical companies toward production of low-cost, effective drugs that are desperately needed in many parts of the globe? How can poor people compete with demand from higher income groups for very expensive medical treatments, “lifestyle-enhancing” products, “designer babies”, and so forth? Progress in dealing with the ravages of AIDS could provide an important case study in this regard.

Transnational corporations and social responsibility. There are aspects of the long debate on corporate responsibility (concentrated in the area of environmental protection) that are clearly relevant to such concerns. With the spread of information technology and the growth of transnational social movements, companies are increasingly sensitive to the potential threat posed by the mobilization of public opinion in favour of well-defined causes. Many have made strong efforts to project an image of “good citizenship” and to develop systems of voluntary regulation in particular industries. A broad respect for all “stakeholders” in the operations of large firms is frequently counterposed to more narrow commitments that grow out of traditional obligations to shareholders in these companies.

What lessons can be learned from this experience to date? The question can be explored not only by assessing the extent to which firms are taking effective steps to create socially

responsible management systems, but also by analysing the types of government policies, market incentives, pressures and partnerships that underpin or facilitate improvement in corporate responsibility. The large body of existing research on public sector regulation of transnational corporations is obviously relevant to such a discussion.

Special activities and events

Work in the programme areas outlined above will be supplemented by a number of activities that allow the Institute to respond to special requests for collaboration, or to take up new challenges to contribute to the development debate.

In June 2000, for example, the United Nations General Assembly will meet in a special session in Geneva to conduct a review of progress in implementing Social Summit agreements. This provides a useful opportunity for all institutions and individuals supporting the Summit goals and Programme of Action to take stock of the current social situation and to put forward ideas that may lead to improvement. One contribution by UNRISD to this process will be a book (*Visible Hands: Taking Responsibility for Social Development*) exploring some of the more important recent attempts in the international community to strengthen the “enabling environment” for social progress. The Institute is also collaborating with scholars in five countries of francophone West Africa to produce a review of social development and social policy reform in their region during the 1990s.

Also in June 2000, the General Assembly, meeting in New York, will hold a special session on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. At that time the Institute will sponsor workshops designed to explore some of the ethical, strategic and theoretical issues raised for women’s movements by a rights-based approach to gender equity.

Other special events are being discussed. It is likely, for example, that the Institute will sponsor an annual retreat at which high-level officials of the United Nations will join other policy makers and scholars to discuss key issues of social development.

Research Strategies and Methodologies

Each of the major efforts of the Institute to promote new research and dialogue is likely to require a somewhat different approach and methodology. As noted above, there is an important place for work that is primarily based on *synthesis, debate and networking*. In some cases, UNRISD can make a useful contribution by identifying key issues, bringing together people who have the most to say on these subjects, providing opportunities for discussion, and making this exchange of ideas available to a wide public through the organization of conferences, publications and electronic dissemination.

There are other areas, however, in which it is particularly important to promote original research and to facilitate *cross-country, cross-cultural* comparison. In such cases, UNRISD must commission new studies in a number of countries, regions, and communities. This work should

be carried out by local researchers, who are most knowledgeable about local conditions, rather than by outsiders attempting to come to grips with an unknown environment in limited time. The comparative nature of the endeavour requires careful preparation, as well as a budget sufficient to allow co-ordination among projects. Initial planning workshops, organized around issues papers, are essential, since good comparative research must be based on a common understanding of the issues to be addressed and on a common research strategy. Once this has been developed, electronic networking can greatly facilitate the exchange of insights and findings among participants throughout the life of the project.

When the studies and reports of such projects become available, a special dissemination effort must also be made. To present the results of complex cross-cultural research in relevant ways, outputs must be tailored to the requirements of diverse audiences and users. Some studies should be published locally and discussed in local fora. Others should reach international audiences. The systematic promotion of translation is obviously a central element in comparative research efforts.

Since most development issues cut across disciplinary boundaries, the Institute is likely to adopt a *multidisciplinary* focus—whether a project is oriented primarily toward synthesizing existing knowledge or carrying out original research. UNRISD research networks usually consist of experts in a number of fields, associated with a variety of institutions. They may be physical or social scientists, academics or NGO activists. The array of skills and viewpoints brought to bear on any problem area has grown wider over the years and has permitted increasingly productive debates and dialogues on complex questions. Clearly the challenge of meshing the talents and interests of physical and social scientists will be especially great in the new Institute programme on Technology and Society; and the success of the programme on Social Policy and Development will depend on the quality of dialogue among macroeconomists, social scientists and practitioners.

Throughout UNRISD work, an effort is also made to ensure that problems are analysed at a number of *levels*, ranging from the *local to the national and international*. Debates conducted only in the international community quite often ignore key insights that would be obvious if seen from a grassroots perspective. And grassroots research can be stunted when capacity to deal with larger (international or transnational) issues is lacking. The global brief of UNRISD makes it especially incumbent on the Institute to forge a link between local, national and international process and issues, and to clarify areas of international organization and policy making that affect the lives of people throughout the world.

The Institute also has a role to play in promoting a better understanding of the way public policy is actually made and implemented. Much development research gives adequate attention to the formal crafting of policy, but stops short of studying the forces that affect its impact on the ground. In consequence, there is scant recognition of the considerable gap that often exists between policies as originally designed or legislated, and the measures that are eventually implemented. This is a serious lapse. It can be remedied through paying attention to the

dangers of formalistic analysis and remembering the need for a “real world” perspective on social development. Such a focus will run through all UNRISD work.

If the Institute is to provide a setting in which original ideas can flourish, it is also important for its research strategy to encourage systematic questioning of predominant ways of thinking. The search for better ways of expressing and reflecting current trends, and analysing current development, requires scepticism. Therefore all UNRISD programmes will be attentive to the dangers of received wisdom. Before using popular catchwords in the global development vocabulary, for example, UNRISD researchers will consider what these really mean. Are they being used differently by different groups? What are their policy implications? Similar questions should be asked of commonly used statistics. Where do they come from? Are they reliable? Through consistently problematizing the constituent elements of prevailing approaches in each area of work at the Institute, it should eventually become possible to make a more general UNRISD contribution to the debate on changing development paradigms.

UNRISD Outreach: A Communications and Dissemination Strategy for the Future

Over the past decade, UNRISD has greatly expanded its dissemination programme, publishing many books commercially and producing a number of in-house publications (monographs, discussion papers, occasional papers, briefing papers and newsletters) that are widely read in the North and South. Workshops and conferences organized by the Institute have also been key elements of its networking and research activities. UNRISD ON-LINE, the Web site of the Institute, receives over 100,000 hits per month and has been key to efforts to reach a growing audience in recent years. In addition to these accomplishments, however, more must be done to intensify and systematize traditional contacts, cultivate new audiences, and raise the profile of the Institute within the UN system and beyond. Six approaches to this challenge are outlined below.

Distilling research findings

UNRISD will inaugurate a new series called *Research and Policy Insights*, which will present research results concisely. This new series will enable UNRISD to address policy issues more frequently and more explicitly, and to reach policy makers, journalists, activists and others who find this format relevant to their work. At the same time, the general UNRISD Discussion Paper series will be superseded by *Programme Papers* in each of the Institute’s five programme areas. Although comparable in style and content to the earlier Discussion Papers, Programme Papers will provide greater coherence in the output of each research area. This, in turn, will make it easier to reach groups with special interests while maintaining contact with the Institute’s traditional audience of academics and researchers.

For readers interested in a broader synthesis of UNRISD findings, drawn from a number of programmes, the Institute will also continue to publish volumes written in journalistic style and illustrated with vivid photographs. *States of Disarray* and *Visible Hands* are examples of such publications.

Improving outreach

Research and Policy Workshops will be organized to facilitate discussion of the findings presented in the Research and Policy Insights series. The workshops, held in Geneva or elsewhere, will bring together a broad range of participants, including members of the international policy-making community and NGOs, as well as researchers involved in relevant UNRISD programmes. The Institute Web site will be used to support this initiative.

Research and Policy Workshops will supplement other workshops and conferences that are regularly organized within the framework of specific UNRISD projects, both in Geneva and in a large number of countries around the world.

Increasing the availability of commercial co-publications in developing countries

Most of the Institute's book-length manuscripts are published by commercial publishers, ensuring wide dissemination of UNRISD research results in the North. Commercially published books are, however, often priced beyond the means of individuals and institutions in the South. The Institute will therefore attempt to publish more systematically with Southern partners and, when these attempts are successful, to ensure dissemination in the North through its own channels.

UNRISD is also exploring other avenues for making research results available to audiences in countries where research has been conducted. For example, Northern publishers are asked to support a two-tiered pricing structure, in which books are sold at lower prices in developing countries. This policy is already in effect for monographs and papers published in-house by UNRISD. Funding will be sought to cover costs associated with translating and publishing in other languages when appropriate.

Depository library system

UNRISD emphasizes dissemination of its publications through libraries and other public-access institutions in the North and South. The current mailing list includes over 1,000 libraries and documentation centres. Over 200 of these are participants in a new depository library initiative, which has strengthened the Institute's programme of free dissemination to developing countries. One suitable institution has been identified in each developing country; and in larger countries, two or three have been chosen. Each institution receives a full set of UNRISD publications free of charge. Libraries in the North no longer receive UNRISD publications free of charge, but are being encouraged to support dissemination in the South through their purchases and subscriptions. The Institute will seek funding to expand the depository library system.

Enhancing Web capabilities and electronic dissemination

UNRISD ON-LINE has attracted an impressive and increasing number of visitors since its redesign in April 1998. The Institute is giving particular attention to how the Web can best be used in the future, whether to promote the work of individual projects, to expand the Institute's network of collaborators, or to support the Research and Policy initiative. The Internet is being used extensively by UNRISD in the follow-up to the Social Summit.

Creating a visual identity

Finally, UNRISD has a new visual identity. At the institutional level, new presentational documents have been produced to increase awareness of UNRISD work and highlight institutional expertise. They also provide essential tools for promoting the Institute and supporting fund raising efforts. At the programme level, new formats for presenting research results are expected to improve the appeal and marketability of programme outputs. It is hoped that more coherent design and presentation will contribute to greater recognition of the Institute in the international development debate.

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

UNRISD is an autonomous agency engaging in multidisciplinary research on the social dimensions of contemporary problems affecting development. Its work is guided by the conviction that, for effective development policies to be formulated, an understanding of the social and political context is crucial. The Institute attempts to provide governments, development agencies, grassroots organizations and scholars with a better understanding of how development policies and processes of economic, social and environmental change affect different social groups. Working through an extensive network of national research centres, UNRISD aims to promote original research and strengthen research capacity in developing countries.

Current research programmes include: Civil Society and Social Movements; Democracy, Governance and Human Rights; Identities, Conflict and Cohesion; Social Policy and Development; and Technology, Business and Society.

A list of UNRISD's free and priced publications may be obtained by contacting the Reference Centre:

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