



United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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The Sustainable Development Agenda From Inspiration to Action

BRIEF

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The SDGs stand a chance of hitting the ground running. Even before they are put before the UN General Assembly, politicians, policy makers, civil society, business and the media have been reacting positively to the new sustainable development agenda.

The agenda is indeed to be welcomed. It responds to the exploding social, economic, political and ecological inequities and the destructive forces of climate change that we face today. It acknowledges the urgent need to invest far more holistically, strategically and comprehensively in the social sector to overcome immense poverty, hunger and social exclusion challenges. It could usher in eco-social policies—bringing together socioeconomic and environmental policies—to deliver genuinely transformative results in terms of human well-being and rights-based, inclusive development.

What now? Moving from inspiration to action

What needs to happen now to enable this agenda to deliver on its “transformative” promise? Which policies would lead to social, economic and ecological justice? How can *all* human rights—promised since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—be realized rapidly and *for all*?

UNRISD, drawing on a large body of research providing critical analysis of diverse country experiences and policy alternatives, identifies 10 areas for urgent and coordinated action.

1. Rights-based, universal social policies. Social policy designs the scope, coverage and quality of public services—such as health, education, access to communication networks, energy, water and sanitation systems, and security of public spaces. If well-functioning social services are understood as a human right, it follows logically that they have to be universal. A universal social system has been the backbone of most successful, cohesive welfare states. It is the basis of a *social compact* that urgently needs to be renewed and reinvigorated.

2. An integrated policy approach. Social policy, in the narrow sense of public service delivery, needs to be combined with macroeconomic, environmental, income, labour market and productivity-enhancing policies. Decent work and a guaranteed minimum income, as promoted in social protection floors, are central to human dignity and a human right. Vital to this endeavour is recognizing, reducing and redistributing the unpaid care and domestic work, which is disproportionately provided by women and girls.

3. Sustainable employment, production and consumption—designed to stem global warming and maintain biodiversity, and aligned with the planet’s carrying capacity. Climate change affects everybody, but impacts socially and economically disadvantaged

groups and countries the most. Public policy must therefore become *eco-social policy*.

4. A revisited role of the state and the public sector. A rights-based agenda ultimately means that states need to shoulder a primary responsibility for delivering on the new agenda. States are the only institution accountable to citizens and residents, and responsible for the availability and quality of public services and the realization and protection of human rights. It is also the role of governments and public institutions to regulate the private sector and to enhance its ability to finance, invest and innovate as well as contribute to productive development and offer decent employment.

5. A new fiscal compact. The Addis Ababa Financing for Development Action Agenda calls for progress in domestic resource mobilization, covering taxation, social contributions, revenues from extractive industries, and other innovative instruments, including decisive action to halt tax evasion. This fiscal compact must also internalize the environmental and social costs of production and consumption, and at the same time enable progressive income redistribution.

6. A shift in the economic rationale. The current unprecedented economic, social and ecological disruptions and inequities threaten us all, hence the call for a universally applicable agenda. These problems are the result of a specific economic rationale that subordinates social and environmental considerations to a narrow logic, focused on growth, profitability and competitiveness. This normative hierarchy for decision making needs to shift, such that sustainable and just social and ecological outcomes are the primary policy consideration. Indeed, new approaches and practices exist and are emerging: the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has explicit social and often environmental objectives, and follows principles of cooperation, democratic self-management and



new thinking on time use. Such initiatives and alternatives need to be encouraged and scaled up. Other examples include purposeful action by states to regain control over markets, move away from excessive austerity, and reduce their reliance on GDP growth to focus instead on employment-intensive, environmentally sound structural change and redistribution of income.

7. A coherent, consensual policy agenda. The 17 SDGs are conceived as cohesive and indivisible. However, given the magnitude of social and ecological divisions, it will be a challenge to integrate all goals and sub-goals, and to reconcile the social, economic and environmental agendas, such as the potential trade-offs between economic growth, decent work and employment, and ecological sustainability. There is also a risk that countries will cherry-pick those SDGs that are easy to achieve and monitor, are less costly, or do not challenge the status quo but reap immediate benefits for powerful elites. National policy processes therefore must empower national and local parliaments, social partners and civil society, and enable debate and compromise among divergent interest groups.

8. Active citizenship and effective participation are guarantors of government accountability to citizens and residents. Some civil society actors are optimistic that their experience in co-negotiating the new agenda will spill over into national processes; conversely, the increasing oppression of civil society in many countries may undermine such participatory potential. Transformation requires substantive participation to shape processes *and* outcomes, which in turn requires democratic political systems and broad-based social mobilization to ensure that policies are grounded in local contexts and reflect people's capacities, aspirations and rights.

9. Peace and security. Societies torn apart by violence, civil strife and conflict cannot deliver on a transformative agenda. Social cohesion and peace, respect for all human rights, and access to justice are non-negotiable preconditions for sustainable development. Governments need to be rights-based, democratic, socially and politically inclusive, as well as sensitized to the fact that climate change affects the disadvantaged disproportionately. Universal social policies can ensure more cohesive societies less prone to conflict via a social contract fostering solidarity and shared responsibility between women and men, between generations, as well as between nationals and residents, including migrants and refugees.

10. Global governance and international redistribution for social, economic and ecological justice. The SDGs cannot begin to be transformative without redressing global economic governance and power imbalances. The existing international trade, financial and investment architectures work systemically against economic equality and social and ecological justice. Here too, the normative hierarchy needs a radical shift. Moreover, the SDGs cannot be transformative without global redistribution of income and wealth. Richer countries have a historical and moral obligation to provide global public finance, such as ODA, to fund or co-fund global public goods as well as the implementation of national-level policy measures that promote sustainable and inclusive development.

The case for a fundamental rethink

The sustainable development agenda explicitly acknowledges that economic structures in production and consumption need to change. But implementation will need to squarely address unequal power relations, notably inequities related to gender, ethnicity, age and other forms of social exclusion. It will need to tackle the drivers that create exclusion, inequality and ecological degradation. To succeed, implementing the SDGs will therefore require a fundamental rethink of our global political, economic and ecological rationales.

The SDGs do stand a chance of hitting the ground running—but only *if* civil society seizes the opportunity to press for structural changes; *if* the academic community rises to the challenge and offers constructive and transformative ideas; and *if* the private sector, governments and the international community depart from the path of business as usual.

About UNRISD

UNRISD has a mandate to study alternative approaches to social development, to analyse diverse models and policy options, and to evaluate the impact of policies on different social groups.

KEY PUBLICATIONS

Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics. 2010. UNRISD: Geneva

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The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues.

Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

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About Beyond 2015 Briefs

UNRISD's "Beyond 2015" Briefs contribute research-based insight and analysis to the dialogue around the post-MDG development agenda. They highlight key information in a concise format, with references to further in-depth reading, useful to policy makers, activists and academics alike.

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