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## Creative Coalitions in a Fractured World

*An Opportunity for Transformative Change?*

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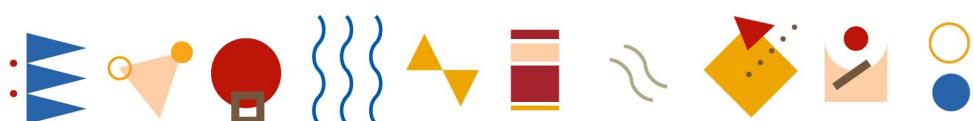
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Occasional Paper 4

**Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World:  
Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization**

January 2020



The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes interdisciplinary 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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## Acronyms

AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
AWIS	Association for Women in Science
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
IDS	Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISSC	International Social Science Council
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PSIDS	Pacific Small Island Developing States
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SSE	Social and solidarity economy
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
VENRO	Verband Entwicklungspolitik und Humanitäre Hilfe (Association of German Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs)

## Abstract

As citizens, activists and analysts, we are alarmed by ever-increasing political, social, economic and climate inequalities and intensifying obstacles vis-à-vis the promises of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Policy retrogression is undermining transformation towards economic, social and climate justice. The growing fractures are ultimately caused by the structures and trends of the reigning economic system, both at the national and global level, a system that can be described as "unfettered capitalism". It is splitting traditional working class and middle-class alliances, and immobilising government decisions in favour of redistribution and social justice: the social contract of democratic welfare statism is under threat. However, one also observes counter-currents of resistance. Hitherto siloed activist communities are coalescing in the form of "creative" coalitions. Anecdotal examples, collected from two countries in the global North, include movements for climate justice, refugee rights, gender justice and general civil rights. The paper discusses their commonalities, strengths and shortcomings, and asks whether these creative coalitions could counter the power of economic interests and retrogressive government policies? It argues that they need to be further analysed, using innovative research approaches. This could help identify the chances of and pathways for transformative change towards a new social contract and an eco-social welfare state.

## Keywords

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, inequalities, climate change, eco-social welfare state, creative coalitions, intersectionality

## Bio

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*The freedom to be free  
is the freedom to participate in public  
affairs.*

Hannah Arendt 2018 [1950]

As citizens, activists and analysts, we are alarmed by ever-increasing political, social, economic and climate inequalities (UNRISD 2018), and widening gaps and intensifying obstacles vis-à-vis the promises of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Jolly et al. 2017b). Policy retrogression is undermining social progress and transformation towards economic, social and climate justice. Many of the gains and achievements of past decades are unravelling – the social contract of democratic welfare statism is under threat.

As the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD 2016) has pointed out, without an analysis of the power structures creating and driving these trends, the much-needed transformative change (United Nations 2015) – and the building of a new eco-social contract – will not come about. Further, such transformations are not possible without movements of resistance (Arendt 2018 [1950]; Jolly et al. 2012; Fisher et al. 2018; White 2020).

The hypothesis in this paper is twofold. Firstly, I argue that growing fractures are ultimately caused by the structures and trends of the reigning economic system, both at the national and global level. The exploitation both of people and of the planet results from a form of “unfettered” capitalism, an economic system increasingly detached from human needs and concerns. It is not sufficiently guided by national governmental action in the public interest, nor by intergovernmental regulation. Since the 1980s, neoliberalism and the financialization of public goods have been dismantling redistributive welfare state governance; the globalization of production chains and the de-localization and dematerialization of production processes have structurally strengthened those classes with economic power and their hold on government decision making; the impact of climate change is splitting traditional working class and middle-class alliances, immobilising government decisions in favour of redistribution and social justice.

Secondly, we observe growing resistance against the noxious impacts of unfettered capitalism with counter-currents<sup>2</sup> emerging in many places. On the one hand, there are increasing numbers of right-wing, neo-nationalist and racist movements. But we also observe another set of movements, coming together in new, progressive “creative coalitions” united in a quest for social justice and human rights. For example, in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ghimire 2005; Ortiz et al. 2013; CIVICUS 2018; White 2020.

economic sphere, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) sees cooperative movements resurfacing after decades of stagnation (Upping 2015). In the political sphere, hitherto siloed activist communities are coalescing; activists are defending rights of disadvantaged groups, outsmarting official government policy. In climate action, political leaders and the wider public are overcoming North-South divides; new players, such as cities, academic communities, spontaneous youth groups, are pressing ahead with climate change analysis and action. This paper discusses selected creative coalitions that have an explicit or implicit commitment to social justice in the broad sense of the term, and the potential for ushering in transformative change.

These progressive movements are triggered precisely in response to the fractured world (UNRISD 2018). Ironically, they are, to a certain degree, made possible by globalization and its technologies, and the political space vacated by the weakened welfare state. Some writers call this phenomenon “emancipatory catastrophism” (Beck 2016): devastating events leading to new forms of resistance and economic organization.

The new coalitions are energetic and unconventional; however, they tend to eschew established political parties or trade unions, and hence remain outside the conventional conduits for progressive policy change in established democracies, via parliamentary processes or organized strike action. They may appear to peter out after an immediate goal is reached (White 2017) – or, in authoritarian states, they are suppressed and persecuted.

The question is then: can these progressive creative coalitions counter the power of economic interests and retrogressive government policies? (How) can such movements converge so as to press for and establish a new form of eco-social government policy, where capitalism is “re-fettered” and transformation towards social justice could begin?

The paper begins with a short note on the current economic system. It then collates anecdotal examples of creative coalitions and counter-currents in two countries in the global North from secondary sources.<sup>3</sup> As an outcome, the case is made to research these initiatives, for example using transdisciplinary approaches, to then build on the findings as a way to bring forward an eco-social compact (UNRISD 2018) and an eco-social welfare state, through more encompassing analysis and a better understanding of the functioning of progressive political movements.

## A Critical Note on Capitalism<sup>4</sup>

It can be argued that growing fractures are ultimately caused by the dominant economic system,<sup>5</sup> both at the national and at the global level. Various strands of critical theory

<sup>3</sup> The paper is based primarily on statements and website write-ups by Civil Society Organizations (CSO), triggered and supplemented by personal observations from events initiated by such groups. The framing comes from selected academic literature on social movements.

<sup>4</sup> Some analysts shy away from using the term capitalism, but it is recently reappearing as a political economy category. See for example Piketty (2014) and Kuttner (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Razavi 2016; UNRISD 2016, 2018; Raworth 2017

(Jeffries 2016) posit that the exploitation both of people and of the planet results from a form of “unfettered capitalism”, an economic system increasingly unhinged from societal commitment in terms of its effects on income and wealth equity, and on the environment (for example Lessenich 2016; Brand and Wissen 2017; Bell 2018, 2019). The economy is not sufficiently guided by and adhering to the rights of citizens and residents. Regulation by national governments and intergovernmental frameworks has been weakened by a variety of factors and recent trends.

Viewed from the political level, there are at least three contributing factors to this situation. As is well rehearsed, the first factor is the neoliberal ideology that gained grip in the 1980s and which has deregulation – a dismantling of government intervention into economic processes – as one of its key tenets. The neoliberal critique was that the preceding era with a strong government, influenced by Keynesian approaches or ordoliberalism in the “West” or the soviet model in the “East”, had created stagflation or a systemic misallocation of resources in industrialized countries, as well as the debt crisis in some low and many middle-income countries. The neoliberal argument was that the market mechanism would lead to optimal or at least better, more efficient, and allegedly merit-based, hence “just”, economic results.

A major component in the neoliberal turn was the privatization of many public goods and services, driven by a downsizing or outsourcing of the government sector, and in due course, by austerity measures. Education and health have globally seen a move to private sector delivery, which in the case of education has resulted in a surge in low- and high-end private schools in low-income countries (Pedró et. Al. 2015). In the health sector, it has led to the centralization of clinics, making them harder to reach for those not living in urban centres, requiring payments for medication even if the medical service is free, and/or a scaling back of staff numbers. Other examples include water and energy supply which in high-income economies was developed as a public good with low user fees, but has seen commercialization in recent decades in South and North.

As the theory of public goods (Musgrave and Musgrave 1985 [1973]; Kaul et al. 1999) would argue, these trends are problematic because a centralized, tax-based provision of

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