



United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

# UNRISD

RESEARCH AND  
POLICY BRIEF

# 23

August 2017

## Transformative Policies for Sustainable Development: What Does It Take?

World leaders have committed to transform our world and leave no one behind in the quest for sustainable development. What needs to happen now to enable the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to deliver on its transformative promise? This Brief presents four key characteristics of innovative policies that facilitate transformative change. These are described in the UNRISD 2016 Flagship Report, which culminates in a call for a radical change in political priorities to put social and ecological justice at the top of the “to-do” list in order to achieve the transformation envisioned in the 2030 Agenda.

Titled “Transforming our World”, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits UN Member States and the international development community to taking “the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path”. But what exactly does *transformation* mean in the context of the 2030 Agenda and, equally importantly, how can it be achieved?

The research behind the UNRISD 2016 Flagship Report, *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change*, points to one overarching conclusion: To create transformative change, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has to address the root causes of inequitable and unsustainable outcomes. This means implementing policies and reforms that *fundamentally change social institutions and relations to make them more inclusive and equitable, and that redistribute power and economic resources*.

This will clearly not be achieved by pursuing business as usual. Innovative policy making and governance reform will be needed. *UNRISD research* shows that innovations that have driven transformative change have the following characteristics.

### 1. Universal and human rights-based approach

When social protection policies target only certain groups, for example the extreme poor or formal-sector employees, people are inevitably left behind, for reasons ranging from structural bias to exclusion errors. In order to achieve the SDGs, states need to seek social policy solutions which are highly inclusive and promote social cohesion, thus creating the transformative change in social relations set out in the 2030 Agenda.

There is solid evidence that universal social systems can do just this, and that they are affordable and feasible for economies at all income levels. *UNRISD research* has identified several developing countries as prime innovators in this potentially transformative area, and analysed the national conditions that made their experience possible as well as the catalysing effect of global initiatives like the Social Protection Floor initiative based on ILO Recommendation No. 202 (2012), and the 2030 Agenda.

Universal approaches to social protection and service provisioning also have the advantage of being consistent with the human rights frameworks that underpin the notion of transformation in the 2030 Agenda. Research shows that human rights-based approaches have multiple positive development impacts and can be a compelling means of both empowering rights holders and holding duty bearers to account.

### 2. Enhanced policy integration

The integration of the three pillars of sustainable development—social, environmental and economic—is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. UNRISD research demonstrates how innovative reframing of policy arrangements and institutions can help break down silos to meet people's needs in a more transformative way. In countries where *social policy* is seen not just as a response to social problems, but as a driver of improved labour markets, productivity and social cohesion, institutions can be built to complement each other, and policies become more coherent. Where a “*care system*” approach becomes a policy umbrella that joins up previously separate policy domains, the result can be not only improved care provision for those in need, but also greater gender equality and better macroeconomic outcomes. Where *climate change* is understood as a social and political issue (and not purely a technical or ecological one) governments design policies, including economic policies, with eco-social objectives in mind and assess the distributional impact of these policies: are lower income or other disadvantaged groups negatively affected? And who is seeing the benefits?

***Policy Innovations for Transformative Change:  
UNRISD Flagship Report 2016***

Drawing on numerous policy innovations from the Global South, the Report goes beyond buzzwords and brings to the development community a definition of transformation which can be used as a benchmark for policy making toward the 2030 Agenda, intended to “leave no one behind”. Bringing together five years of UNRISD research across six areas—social policy, care policy, social and solidarity economy, eco-social policy, domestic resource mobilization, and politics and governance—the report explores what transformative change really means for societies and individuals.

[www.unrisd.org/flagship2016](http://www.unrisd.org/flagship2016)



This kind of policy coherence is not simply about better coordination, but more fundamentally about ensuring progress in all three development pillars simultaneously through inclusive and empowering decision-making processes; and where trade-offs between pillars are unavoidable, carefully managing the distributional consequences.

### Care in Uruguay: innovative process and policies

Policy reform to create the Uruguayan National Care System (Sistema Nacional Integrado de Cuidado / SNIC), adopted in November 2015, was innovative in many ways. It was highly participatory, featuring National Care Dialogues to raise awareness and draw on local knowledge; it involved broad political alliances between women's and social movements, women parliamentarians, academics and the ruling party Frente Amplio; it foregrounded coordination across ministries right from the beginning; and it adopted a rights-based approach, which functions as a powerful framework to exert claims on the state. Other ambitious reform goals to be achieved include: changing the division of labour within households, improving gender equality, and creating high-quality care services with decent work for paid care providers.

### MGNREGA in India: eco-social policy

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India innovates in the way it addresses social and environmental sustainability goals through an integrated, eco-social approach. Much of the work under the scheme, established in 2005 as a form of social protection by guaranteeing up to 100 days of paid employment to poor people in rural areas, is devoted to environmental conservation, natural resource management (including the creation of durable assets), improved water security, soil conservation and higher land productivity. Persistent challenges include improving beneficiaries' skills development and the long-term sustainability of created assets.

### Health care in Rwanda: innovative partnerships

Since 1999, community-based health insurance (CBHI), via partnerships between faith-based and community-run health insurance schemes, non-governmental organizations, public health services, foreign donors and global health funds, has been a major means of extending health insurance in Rwanda. As CBHI took off, it was complemented by measures to secure it institutionally: donor funds were coordinated with the government's Health Sector Strategic Plan, and the Rwanda Social Security Board took on national management of CBHI to scale up its reach and expand benefits.

Obstacles still remain, in particular the exclusion of the poorest, low benefits and poor service quality. Sustainability may also be challenged by authoritarian tendencies which systematically exclude opposition political forces, and heavy dependence on foreign aid.

## 3. Markets that work for society and the environment

With the predominance of neoliberalism in recent decades, the balance between the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development has been put out of kilter, with a distinct dominance of the economic pillar putting growth ahead of all other objectives. As a result, social concerns like people's ability to meet their basic provisioning needs, or having not just an income from a job but a fair income, security at work and basic social protection, have been neglected in deference to pursuing economic growth. Protecting the environment and using planetary resources sustainably have also taken a back seat compared with efforts to increase profits and market shares.

To achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNRISD research points to the need to reverse this hierarchy: social and environmental objectives must be put ahead of economic ones. Indeed, there are emerging forms of economic activity in the social and solidarity economy (SSE) which do have social and often environmental aims. Innovative policies that support such an *eco-social turn* are needed at local and national levels, and must inform global policy regimes too.

## 4. Empowered participation

Such significant changes cannot be achieved with a top-down approach. For changes to be transformative, the process by which they are achieved needs to be inclusive of all social actors.

Many of the policy innovations showcased in the UNRISD 2016 Flagship Report have been propelled by social innovations that amplify traditionally subaltern voices, such as networked or transnational activism (both enabled by innovations in communications technology), and multistakeholder initiatives, often led by non-state actors, that set standards and procedures to enhance accountability. Evidence shows that effective participation goes beyond "having a seat at the table" and includes diverse forms of contestation and claims-making such as advocacy, lobbying, monitoring, protest and negotiation, as well as critical research. So achieving the transformation envisioned in the 2030 Agenda may have to be a bumpy ride, with spaces for contestation as well as mechanisms for the less powerful to make their voices heard and influence decisions that affect them.

Transformative change also requires public, private and civil society actors to create true partnerships that lead to a more equitable distribution of power, resources, knowledge and responsibilities. Research shows that hybrid governance arrangements like public-private-partnerships (PPPs) need close scrutiny to ensure that they are in fact transformative and do not simply reinforce existing power asymmetries.

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.

UNRISD gratefully acknowledges support from its institutional and project funders. See [www.unrisd.org/funding](http://www.unrisd.org/funding) for details.

Our work would not be possible without their support.



[www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland  
[info@unrisd.org](mailto:info@unrisd.org)

## Research and Policy Briefs

UNRISD Research and Policy Briefs aim to improve the quality of development dialogue. They situate the Institute's research within wider social development debates, synthesize its findings and draw out issues for consideration in decision-making processes. They provide this information in a concise format that should be of use to policy makers, scholars, activists, journalists and others.

This Research and Policy Brief was prepared by Joannah Caborn Wengler.

Copyright © UNRISD. Short extracts may be reproduced unaltered without authorization on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation, apply to UNRISD.

Download free from [www.unrisd.org/rpb23](http://www.unrisd.org/rpb23)

ISSN 1811-0142. Photo by Ted McGrath (Common Creatives via Flickr)

Transformative Policies for Sustainable Development: What Does It Take?



**UNRISD**  
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development



# 我们的产品



## 大数据平台

国内宏观经济数据库

国际经济合作数据库

行业分析数据库

## 条约法规平台

国际条约数据库

国外法规数据库

## 即时信息平台

新闻媒体即时分析

社交媒体即时分析

## 云报告平台

国内研究报告

国际研究报告

预览已结束，完整报告链接和二维码如下：

[https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5\\_20754](https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_20754)

