



Research to Action

Global Policy Seminar for a New Eco-Social Contract

The current state of multiple and overlapping global crises presents a much-needed opportunity for negotiating new eco-social contracts that consider the interdependence between humans and the environment, address skyrocketing inequalities and remedy entrenched injustices. The Covid-19 pandemic and geopolitical dynamics have further exposed the fragility and inequalities of our existing socioeconomic and political systems and highlighted the need for a new approach that prioritizes sustainability, equality, justice, peace and resilience. Recognizing this urgency, UNRISD convened a Global Policy Seminar that brought together experts, policy makers, activists, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to deliberate on the prospects and promise of new eco-social contracts for sustainable futures. The seminar was part of the activities jointly convened by UNRISD and the Green Economy Coalition (GEC) in the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract. The two-day hybrid event featuring keynote addresses, plenary sessions, expert panels and presentations reached almost two hundred participants from over sixty countries. This brief summarizes some of the key takeaways from the seminar presentations and interventions.

In the context of escalating global crises, social contracts are breaking down.

The social contracts currently holding together our hyperglobalized neoliberal world order—one marked by unchecked environmental destruction, exponentially expanding inequalities and gross power imbalances—must be reformed. During the event, various presentations explored normative frameworks that can inspire and inform the creation of new eco-social contracts to ensure they are inclusive, just and sustainable. Eseosa Joy Sowemimo (University of Benin) advocated for the incorporation of traditional African communitarian approaches, defined by trust and cooperation, into the emerging eco-social contract that places a specific emphasis on fostering harmony between humanity and nature. She rooted visions for eco-social contracts in African communitarian philosophies

The Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract

The Global Policy Seminar was co-organized by the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract (GRAN-ESC) which is co-led by UNRISD and the Green Economy Coalition (GEC). The Network of over 370 members brings together research, practice, advocacy and policy communities working for social, climate and environmental justice in a progressive knowledge and action alliance. It aims to broaden understanding around the idea of a new eco-social contract; define its terms, including a just transition to climate resilient, green and fair economies; and identify the actions required of stakeholders at multiple levels to ensure its implementation based on processes that are inclusive, participatory, transparent and accountable. Members of the Network have self-organized into working groups that meet once every month and produce outputs such as webinars, think pieces, briefs, podcasts, etc. on their thematic areas. The Global Study on New Eco-Social Contracts is a compilation of outputs produced by the Network.

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such as Ubuntu, which reflects the oneness of humanity in its proclamation of “I am because we are,” going beyond the human community to include all of nature. At the core of the vision for a new eco-social contract is the imperative to reconceive our relationship with the natural world—a departure from historical social contracts primarily centred on the citizen–state nexus, as pointed out by Najma Mohamed (United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre – UNEP-WCMC) and Patrick Huntjens (Maastricht University).

Sylvain Aubry and Lena Simet (Human Rights Watch) explored another normative framework on which eco-social contracts can build—that of human rights. They presented a paper which explores the potential of human rights to guide these contracts, rectify power imbalances, cultivate consensus, and assess adherence to principles of social justice, with a specific focus on the role of transformative social policies.

Finally, a number of speakers touched on how an inequality lens can inform the creation of eco-social contracts. The imperative to go beyond a poverty-reduction approach and confront inequalities becomes evident when one aims to mend fractured social contracts or formulate new, more inclusive agreements that address the power asymmetries inherent in most social contracts. Eva-Maria Egger from BMZ highlighted the nuanced and multifaceted nature of contemporary inequalities. Her insights underscored the need for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond conventional measures of income disparities. UNRISD’s Francisco Cos Montiel emphasized gender parity as a central in the pursuit of equitable transformations. He also underscored the significance of political negotiations involving diverse actors across the political spectrum to arrive at gender-egalitarian public policies.

Making Bonn climate neutral by 2035

Cities around the world are taking action against climate change and promoting sustainability. The City of Bonn, Germany, is a prime example of such proactive measures. In response to the prevailing climate crisis, Bonn has officially declared a climate emergency and established a target of achieving climate neutrality by 2035. This commitment, articulated by Bonn Deputy Mayor Ursula Sautter during her keynote address, underscores the city’s dedication to addressing environmental challenges while emphasizing the imperative of global social justice.

Deputy Mayor Sautter highlighted the City of Bonn’s comprehensive approach to confronting climate, nature and land emergencies. Emphasizing the interconnectedness of these challenges, she introduced the Bonn4Future participatory process, a strategic roadmap guiding the city’s transition toward renewable energies and sustainable mobility. The success of such a transformative endeavor, which engages citizens, societal stakeholders and experts in a collaborate venture, hinges significantly upon supportive framework conditions provided by national governments and the active participation of urban society. The Bonn Climate Plan 2035 stands as a commendable milestone in advancing this objective.

Gesa Maschkowski, who is leading the Bonn4Future Initiative, concluded in her presentation that striving for shared principles of community, fairness and sustainability underscores the crucial role of co-creation. This requires the participation of stakeholders to empower communities in a vital societal learning process. Acknowledging that meaningful change is best realized through inclusive participation in the transformation process, the emphasis on active community engagement, education and collaboration seamlessly aligned with the seminar’s overarching aim of achieving a new eco-social contract.

Eco-social contracts can act as drivers for just transitions

Eco-social contracts play a vital role in garnering societal agreement for the shift toward low-carbon economies, safeguarding the interests of affected workers and vulnerable groups, a principle commonly referred to as “just transition.” The active involvement of diverse stakeholders is crucial in reaching such a consensus, and the swift development of practical alternatives for energy sources and employment opportunities is equally essential, as highlighted in presentations during the seminar.

Timing is a crucial aspect of just transition, as it is essential that meaningful alternatives are established prior to any workforce adjustments, safeguarding the well-being and livelihoods of workers as we navigate the dynamics of a just and equitable transition. Gaylor Montmasson-Clair (Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies – TIPS, South Africa) highlighted the lack of consideration for grassroots stakeholders in policy-making processes. Using the example of South Africa’s shift away from coal-based activities, he pointed out that policy decisions are often made in big cities without much input from local governments, businesses, unions and communities. Achieving inclusivity requires finding a middle ground where stakeholders can contribute, but this can be time-consuming and may not align with policy development timelines. However, with genuine commitment from government and policy makers, these challenges can be overcome.

Carlos E. Villaseñor’s (Ombudsman Energía, Mexico) discussion on Mexico’s experience with just energy transitions served as an illustrative example, emphasizing the effectiveness of mobilizing collective action such as movements and protests beyond traditional power structures. The importance of not only involving stakeholders but also promptly preparing viable alternatives such as strengthening property laws to ensure

the rights of Indigenous communities was underscored, which added to the discourse on the dynamics of just transitions. He also emphasized that in light of several political transitions taking place in South America, civil society will play a crucial role in forwarding the just transition discussions.

Contributions from Mauro Leonardo Pucheta (University of Kent), Lauren Danielowski (University of Connecticut) and Daniela Chavez (independent consultant) explored the complexities of just transitions within informal labour sectors. Their analyses acknowledged the enduring relevance of informal workforces and advocated for practical solutions, recognizing the need to address the specific challenges, such as a lack of social protection and the need for reskilling faced by informal workers in the transition process. Informal workers are integral to the shift toward a green economy, facilitated by social dialogue mechanisms that involve their organizations, employer adherence to workers’ rights, and the adoption of intersectional feminist approaches in laws and policies to dismantle gender-based barriers to decent work and ensure protection of economic rights.

While just transition is often discussed in terms of the change that must occur at the national level, it is not possible to truly achieve fair decarbonization without global consensus and binding multilateral agreements. UNRISD associate Gabriele Köhler shared experiences related to the Treaty Alliance for a New Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights. She underscored the imperative for binding accords, emphasizing their potential to redefine the rights of both nature and people and to move beyond voluntary action that has proven to be insufficient. Gabriele shed light on the role of international agreements in shaping and influencing national eco-social contracts through regulations that oblige business actors to observe global environmental and social standards along the value chain. Global governance is essential

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African philosophical concepts like Ubuntu, Ujamaa and Harambee speak to interconnectedness, cooperation and community – we cannot progress without each other.”

— Eseosa Joy Sowemimo
University of Benin



The SDGs encapsulate a collective commitment to addressing global inequalities, environmental sustainability and social justice, serving as a comprehensive and globally embraced eco-social contract for shared prosperity within planetary boundaries.



for addressing climate change broadly. Sasha Alexander, representing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), highlighted UN conventions as exemplars of eco-social contracts on a global scale. Within the UNCCD context, he pointed out the establishment of new norms related to land tenure and women's land rights, driven by the efforts of civil society organizations. Sasha's perspective on global eco-social contracts aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), representing a global pact for sustainable development. The SDGs encapsulate a collective commitment to addressing global inequalities, environmental sustainability and social justice, serving as a comprehensive and globally embraced eco-social contract for shared prosperity within planetary boundaries.

Pathways for participatory eco-social contracting

In the endeavor to forge new eco-social contracts, a paradigm shift is imperative, necessitating a departure from conventional decision-making models. This calls for inclusive processes that span political jurisdictions, ranging from local to global, with active participation from a diverse array of citizens and stakeholders. Historically, social contracts have predominantly manifested as elite bargains, marginalizing significant portions of the population from the formulation of societal objectives and the shaping of their collective future.

One stream of presentations during the seminar critically centred on delineating pathways for participatory eco-social contracting. Emphasizing the paramount importance of societal inclusion and the proactive involvement of civil society in influencing the contours of inclusive social contracts, Alina Saba (National Indigenous Women Forum – NIWF) made a comprehensive examination scrutinizing the transformative shifts in the social policies

of Nepal and India throughout the 2000s and 2010s. The contribution from Swetha Rao Dhananka and Anne Deepak of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) underscored the pivotal role of social work as a human rights profession in advancing eco-social contracts. They proposed heightened engagement of social workers and social work organizations with UN human rights mechanisms to harness the practical knowledge of social workers and their first-hand experience of working with vulnerable groups. They advocated for less top-down approaches and better inclusion and representation of affected communities in multilateral decision making—which could be achieved through mechanisms such as people's assemblies.

Mônica Vilaça da Silva's (The Nature Conservancy, Brazil) paper delved into the strategies employed by the Brazilian State of Pará in response to environmental and socio-economic challenges. The analysis ventured into the historical and social dimensions of the region's development, shedding light on the interplay between the forest-centred lifestyles of original peoples and the experiences of migrant peasants. Her paper critically evaluated the state's climate policies, delving into their ethical implications for governance, with a particular emphasis on the imperative to acknowledge and incorporate nature and non-human entities in dialogues about inhabiting a diverse world.

Minimization of entry barriers toward political participation, particularly within local contexts, was advocated by Jesper Muecke from Fridays for Future. He proposed a departure from global North-centric initiatives in international arenas, underscoring the importance of local empowerment and a global recalibration of initiatives to ensure more equitable and inclusive participatory processes. Along similar lines, Holger Kuhle (GIZ) stressed the efficacy of interactive methodologies rooted in facilitated discussions. He emphasized the

inclusion of diverse participants as catalytic agents for fostering inclusive processes, thereby contributing to the overarching objective of participatory eco-social contracting.

Partnerships for a new eco-social contract

Partnerships for a new eco-social contract unfolded as a significant parameter in shaping the discourse, implementation and integration of new societal and ecological agreements. The theme underscored the transformative potential embedded in collaborative approaches and alliance building, recognizing the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in the pursuit of a sustainable and inclusive eco-social contract.

The presentations under this theme underscored the intrinsic interconnectedness between diverse stakeholders and the imperative of forging partnerships to navigate the complexities inherent in redefining societal contracts. Peter Krahle from BMZ acknowledged UNRISD's foresight in framing the discourse on eco-social contracts, aligning it with the political landscape—particularly in resonance with the German government coalition's approach. Calling it a happy coincidence, he emphasized that the concept of a new eco-social contract has also inspired the agreement of the current ruling coalition, which is an eco-social democratic liberal coalition. The concept and the contract remain valid for contemporary public debates as it is a holistic agenda that combines the Sustainable Development Goals and the climate agenda with the older concepts for fighting social inequalities.

Oliver Greenfield's contribution from the Green Economy Coalition articulated the foundational principles of new eco-social contracts, grounding them in a solidarity-driven agenda. This emphasis on shared values and collaborative principles aligned with the overarching theme, highlighting the necessity

for partnerships that transcend traditional boundaries and foster transformative initiatives. His call for three Ms—mechanisms (such as participatory processes like citizen assemblies, citizen advisory bureaus or even litigation), movements and mandates—amplified the importance of collaborative approaches in the realms of both research and actionable strategies.

Rubén Campos from Club de Madrid expanded the narrative by illuminating how a new eco-social contract framework can advance social inclusion and prompt a reevaluation of social development. The Club de Madrid's decision to integrate the new eco-social contract framework into policy dialogues accentuates the role of partnerships in the practical implementation and integration of these frameworks into policy-making processes. Sara Valdes from the Global Alliance for Care added a crucial layer to the discourse by connecting the concept of a new eco-social contract with that of the care economy. This linkage underlines the interconnectedness of care, sustainability, gender equity and economic autonomy, weaving a narrative that brings out the need for partnerships to address complex and interrelated societal challenges.



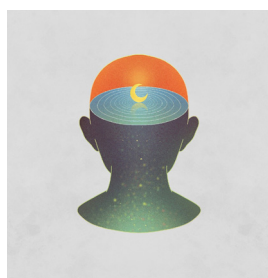
“Mechanisms, Movements and Mandates—3M—together with a representative dialogue with the impacted and excluded must be the way to transition towards new eco-social contracts.”

— Oliver Greenfield
Green Economy
Coalition





Implementing a new eco-social contract faces challenges such as resistance to change, complex political and economic landscapes, and financial strains associated with transitioning to sustainable practices.



Implementing new eco-social contracts: Challenges and opportunities

An overarching theme permeating the presentations were the challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of new eco-social contracts. Implementing a new eco-social contract faces challenges such as resistance to change, complex political and economic landscapes, and financial strains associated with transitioning to sustainable practices. Overcoming these obstacles is crucial for the opportunities presented, including fostering innovation, creating green jobs and mitigating environmental degradation. Achieving these goals requires collaborative efforts among governments, businesses and communities. Striking a balance between challenges and benefits necessitates strategic planning, international cooperation, and a shared commitment to building a more sustainable and inclusive global society.

In exploring the complex landscape of implementing new eco-social contracts, Nkosikhona Sibanda's (Institute for Research Advocacy and Development – IRAD, Zimbabwe) paper explored the critical role of community-based natural resource

management (CBNRM) in achieving environmental justice. Sibanda emphasized the challenges inherent in CBNRM approaches, focusing on governance intricacies, capacity-building needs and financial hurdles. He argued for inclusive and equitable eco-social contracts as key instruments in empowering local communities to actively engage in resource management and conservation efforts.

Shifting focus to the agricultural sector, Arindam Laha's (University of Burdwan) study underscored the potential of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and its alignment with SDGs at the local level. Laha advocated for a paradigm shift toward eco-social agriculture, highlighting social enterprises as crucial players in facilitating initiatives that blend economic activities and ecological sustainability. His study presented a mapping of opportunities, demonstrating how a mutually reinforcing relationship between economic activities and environmental outcomes can be cultivated.

Turning attention to Nepal's constitutional landscape, Sachin Siwakoti's (Kathmandu School of Law) presentation explored the



Supreme Court's pivotal role in interpreting constitutional guarantees related to environmental and social justice. His paper navigated the challenges and obstacles in realizing the transformative potential of the emerging eco-social contract in Nepal from a legal perspective. Siwakoti's exploration provided valuable insights for policy makers and practitioners grappling with the intricate dynamics of environmental justice and sustainable development within the constitutional framework.

In a distinct context, Amitabha Sarkar's (Tampere University) paper, rooted in a study conducted in South Asia's Sundarbans, critically assessed existing health system policies. Sarkar advocated for a holistic One Health approach in establishing eco-social contracts in climate-vulnerable contexts, which acknowledges that human, animal and ecosystem health are deeply intertwined at that to address one you must address all. The One Health approach is a system-wide intervention designed to simultaneously promote human health and well-being, protect against pathogens, and halt and reverse environmental degradation.

Costa Rica's shift to environmental sustainability

In a keynote address, former president of Costa Rica Carlos Alvarado Quesada shared the story of Costa Rica's shift toward environmental sustainability and provided valuable insights into the process of re-negotiating eco-social contracts. Detailing Costa Rica's pioneering decarbonization journey, he underlined its early inception and the extensive collaboration across various sectors it involved. He highlighted the economic viability of the decarbonization plan, which not only garnered support from allies but also successfully overcame initial backlash on financing. Alvarado Quesada also delved into the conceptual evolution of the approach, emphasizing the principles of decarbonization, diversification and depolarization. This approach underscored the necessity of transformative change, particularly concerning future generations. Moreover, he touched upon diplomatic considerations, especially within the context of multipolar power dynamics. The keynote highlighted the importance of fostering a collective spirit—an "ocean of togetherness"—and the need to depolarize communities in order to facilitate inclusive eco-social contract building.

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Decarbonizing is not only ethically good for the environment, but also economically beneficial, as demonstrated by our independent studies and the positive outcomes we experienced in Costa Rica.”

— Carlos Alvarado Quesada
Former President of Costa Rica

From research to action

The Global Policy Seminar concluded with a resounding call for immediate action to put the eco-social contract vision into practice. Over the two days, the seminar delved into diverse cultural contexts, drawing upon philosophical paradigms to thoroughly examine various conceptualizations related to new eco-social contracts. The presentations emphasized the universal nature of human bonds and the intricate interconnection between humanity and the environment. Key takeaways included the imperatives of community-building, proactive community





learning and inclusive engagement as essential drivers for policy adoption and behavioural change, particularly in light of the urgent challenges posed by climate change and concurrent global crises. Discussions emphasized that achieving a just transition relies on addressing social aspects, including social protection, decent work and a human rights-based approach. Collectively, the panels stressed the lesson that unexpected alliances can form across diverse sectors, uniting around shared objectives. This highlighted the significance of actively engaging a diverse array of stakeholders and employing interactive methodologies as indispensable components of inclusive processes in shaping new eco-social contracts.

Ambassador Rainer Lassig (German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs) extended congratulations to UNRISD on its 60th anniversary, emphasizing the paramount importance of international cooperation and policy research in tackling global challenges. The conclusion resonated with a call to translate discussions into concrete actions, recognizing the urgency and collective responsibility in navigating the complex landscape of sustainability and inclusivity.

About Event Briefs

UNRISD Event Briefs highlight knowledge that can improve the quality of development debates, policy and practice. They offer readers a concise overview and key highlights of the discussions at selected UNRISD project workshops, conferences and international meetings. Through these briefs, UNRISD provides information about its events and the discussions taking place, which may not otherwise be available to interested audiences.

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About UNRISD

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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