

RETHINKING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT FOR A NEW ECO-SOCIAL CONTRACT

An UNRISD Contribution to the Second World Summit for Social Development



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Abstract

As governments gather in Doha, Qatar, for the second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2), the world is confronting an era of intersecting crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, growing inequalities, geopolitical tensions, democratic backsliding, and violent conflicts. As a result, trust in existing social contracts—the collective agreements that shape our societies, norms and responsibilities at multiple governance levels—is eroding. The triple planetary crisis underscores the urgent need to redefine humanity’s relationship with nature and reimagine the foundations of social and economic development, while new challenges associated with digital technologies and artificial intelligence require decisive action and new governance frameworks.

The Second World Summit for Social Development is poised to serve as a platform for much-needed rethinking on how to catalyze social development in an era of uncertainty, allowing stakeholders to align efforts toward poverty eradication, decent work for all and enhanced social integration, and to give momentum to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This paper examines the major challenges facing social development today that need to be addressed to accelerate SDG implementation and pave the way for a new global eco-social pact that can guide multilateral cooperation and national development policies beyond 2030. Drawing on findings from global and regional consultations conducted by UNRISD in 2024 and 2025, complemented by recent UNRISD research, this briefing paper offers key insights and policy recommendations to support a transformative and actionable political declaration at WSSD2. It calls on policy makers to move beyond expressions of intent to time-bound, measurable commitments and concrete implementation strategies; the UN to develop global governance structures that address power asymmetries and enable inclusive and sustainable development pathways; and civil society actors to mobilize grassroots advocacy for economic, environmental and social justice, while actively monitoring WSSD2 outcomes to ensure governments’ accountability to their commitments.

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
GDP	Gross domestic product
ILO	International Labour Organization
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer +
LMICs	Low- and middle-income countries
MSMEs	Micro, small and medium enterprises
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WSSD2	Second World Summit for Social Development

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1. Introduction

In November 2025, the United Nations will convene the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2) (UN 2024a, 2025) to address ongoing social challenges and renew commitments made in the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action (UN 1995). Five years before the end date of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in a post-pandemic context of complex and urgent challenges, the WSSD2 comes at a critical juncture. Recent Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) progress reports show an alarming picture, with stalled progress and outright backsliding across the board (UN 2024b, 2025). While since 1995 more than a billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, multiple crises and broken social contracts have created a challenging scenario for social development, democracy and SDG achievement, as explored in the UNRISD 2022 flagship report (UNRISD 2022). The post-pandemic recovery faces headwinds in the form of a cost-of-living crisis, monetary, financial and fiscal constraints, a growing debt crisis in the global South, and rising inequalities, including a reversal of hard-fought progress on human rights, especially for women and girls. Climate change and environmental destruction undermine development and human well-being, while geopolitical tensions and democratic backsliding have further complicated international cooperation, straining multilateral institutions and weakening collective action on global challenges. In many regions, polarization and declining trust in institutions have fueled policy fragmentation (Justino and Samarin 2025; UNDP 2024), making it increasingly difficult to build consensus on transformative social policies. On the other hand, developments with the potential to make a positive impact, such as the use of new technologies and green transition policies, often lead to new inequalities and exclusions when poorly governed and implemented.

Thirty years after the first World Social Summit in Copenhagen, it is time to take stock and look forward. Building on the legacy of the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action, the Doha Summit will address enduring challenges of poverty eradication, full and productive employment, and social integration (UN 2024a). It should also address new vulnerabilities associated with digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), climate change and armed conflicts, as well as rebuild trust in institutions to advance social justice and equity. Historically, social development has been relegated to the back burner amid the prevailing economic discourses. However, the realities of our time—marked by rising inequalities, democratic backsliding and environmental degradation—demand a decisive pivot toward a more inclusive and equitable development approach. The Second World Summit for Social Development is poised to serve as a platform for this much-needed rethinking, allowing stakeholders to align efforts toward poverty eradication, decent work for all and enhanced social integration. By taking stock of the lessons learned since the original Copenhagen Summit in 1995, we can better understand what needs to be done to ensure that social development takes its rightful place on political agendas worldwide (see box 1).

Box 1. Ensuring inclusive participation at the Second World Summit for Social Development: UNRISD consultations

From 4-6 November 2025, the United Nations will convene the Second World Summit for Social Development to address ongoing social challenges and renew commitments made in the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action. The Summit aims to reaffirm the objectives of the Copenhagen Declaration of poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration, while identifying current challenges that need to be addressed. As the only research institute within the UN dedicated to research on the social dimension of development, UNRISD has played a key role in preparing the road to Doha, through research, stakeholder engagement and capacity-building, providing a space for critical thinking and a plurality of ideas and discussions on diverse perspectives, informed by voices from the global South and from less powerful constituencies. To ensure inclusive participation in the process leading up to the WSSD2, UNRISD, in collaboration with key partners, engaged its global, multi-sector network through the organization of regional consultation meetings that took place in late 2024 and early 2025. The objective was to understand key concerns and collect effective policy solutions tailored to regional, sub-regional and national contexts while reflecting a plurality of approaches and the needs of diverse communities and social groups. The findings from the regional consultations reflect the perspectives of participating experts and do not constitute a comprehensive analysis of regional challenges, however, they highlight priority issues and proposed solutions identified during the dialogues.

→ Find a more comprehensive overview of the outcomes of all consultations carried out by UNRISD [here](#).

1.1 Background and context: Social development at a crossroads

UNRISD highlights the 1995 World Social Summit for Development as a pivotal moment initiating the “social turn” in development discourse and policy (UNRISD 2016). This turning point marked a new focus on social issues within development agendas, recognizing that the dominant belief in the self-regulating capacity of markets was inadequate to address the growing complexity of global challenges. The call to realign priorities toward social development emerged as a necessary counteraction to the pervasive influence of neoliberal stabilization and adjustment policies predominant since the late 20th century. These policies, characterized by deregulation, privatization, liberalization and austerity measures, the so-called Washington Consensus (Williamson 1990), had catalyzed extensive social exclusion, deepened economic disparities, and led to the dismantling of critical public institutions, which are essential for social cohesion, welfare provision and economic stewardship (UNRISD 1995, 2000). Structural adjustment had also failed to change the extractive economic model and its negative impacts on the environment, a challenge at the heart of the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development and the resulting Agenda 21 (UN 1992; Barraclough 2005).

The expectation at the Copenhagen Summit was that the social turn would recentre the social dimensions of sustainable development by promoting a normative and policy shift and greater investments in social policies. However, despite the promises inherent in the social turn, its potential to bring about transformative change and address the root causes of poverty and inequality was largely impeded by the continued dominance of Washington Consensus policies and the promotion of a residual social policy paradigm (UNRISD 2016; Hujo 2025). Instead, these policies have often resulted in reforms that do not fundamentally address the structural inequalities embedded within our economic and social systems. This has contributed to a situation where social contracts—agreements between governments, citizens and other stakeholders that underpin social welfare and shared responsibilities—are increasingly contested and delegitimized, reflecting a disconnect between the aspirations of social development and the realities of marginalized populations (UNRISD 2022; UN 2021).

While there have been some advancements in health, education and social protection since the onset of the social turn, progress has been stymied by the entrenched dominance of a global economic model that prioritizes individual gain over collective well-being and stewardship of global commons. This model has not only perpetuated systemic inequalities but also precipitated multiple interconnected crises—be they economic, environmental or social—as evidenced by the rising currents of climate change, political instability and public health emergencies. These intertwined crises of inequality (UNRISD 2022) are not merely byproducts of global capitalism but are instead symptomatic of a broader failure to implement inclusive, equitable and sustainable development frameworks. As a result, the vision of a society characterized by shared prosperity, where quality employment and social inclusion are afforded to all, seems increasingly elusive.

1.2 The transformative change we need now

There is a growing consensus to act collectively as a matter of urgency to put the global economy onto more sustainable and equitable pathways. Opinions differ, however, on the types of policies and institutional reform that would be most effective and feasible to address the complex challenges the world is facing. In this struggle of ideas and information of diverse quality and reliability, it is important to provide a robust evidence base and clear messages on what has worked and what has not worked and in which contexts and under what conditions, and to make this knowledge accessible and relevant for policy makers and other stakeholders.

Joint action for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development needs to focus on the fight against inequality, poverty and environmental destruction. In addition, social development policies today need to address social exclusion and discrimination, lack of productive employment and decent work, lack of access to quality social services and social protection, gender inequality, conflicts and social polarization, and problems related to fast evolving global trends such as digitalization and demographic change. In this debate, UNRISD is highlighting the importance of integrated policy approaches—endorsed in the Doha Declaration in Art. 24 (UNDESA 2025a)—that combine economic, social and environmental goals and are guided by diverse knowledge

systems and pluralistic research evidence. Key examples include eco-social policies and just transition (UNRISD 2016; Hujo and Koehler forthcoming), integrated care systems (UNRISD 2016) and intersectional approaches to address inequality (UNRISD 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

This paper will delve into key issue areas that must be addressed in the context of WSSD2. It will draw on UNRISD research and the findings from the global survey and regional consultations the Institute conducted in preparation of the Summit (see box 2). It will first explore major challenges facing social development, with a focus on four areas: growing inequality and social injustice; eroding social protection, public services and decent work opportunities; poor governance, democratic backsliding and erosion of human rights; and the climate crisis. It will then turn to policy priorities for WSSD2 and its follow-up process, with a focus on transformative social policies for sustainable development; just transitions to equitable and resilient futures; alternative economies for climate, care and inclusion; economic governance and fair fiscal contracts; and reforming global governance. The fourth section puts forward recommendations for action, framed as new eco-social contracts, focusing on governments and policy makers, international organizations and multilateral actors, and civil society.

Box 2. Methodology: Global survey on social development priorities

The findings presented in this paper draw on data collected through a global survey conducted by UNRISD between August 2024 and February 2025. The survey formed a core component of the Institute's broader consultation process in preparation for WSSD2, aimed at ensuring that the Summit agenda is informed by the voices of diverse stakeholders from across regions and sectors.

Designed to be participatory and inclusive, the survey asked respondents to identify the three most urgent social development challenges and three key demands for policy makers they wanted to see addressed at WSSD2 in Doha. Responses were collected in free-text format, allowing participants to express their views in their own words. The survey was distributed through UNRISD's global network of practitioners, researchers, civil society actors and policy makers.

In total, 519 individuals completed the survey with near gender parity—51 percent women and 46 percent men—and 3 percent identifying as non-binary or other genders. The majority of respondents were aged 41–60, representing 43 percent, followed by 30 percent aged 26–40, and notable contributions from younger (13 percent under 25) and older (14 percent over 60) participants. Geographically, the greatest number of responses came from Africa (28 percent), Western Europe (27 percent), the Asia-Pacific region (24 percent) and the Americas (17 percent total; 9 percent North America, 8 percent Latin America and the Caribbean). Finally, there was strong participation from academia and civil society, each representing around one third of respondents. The last third included a mix of governments/missions/embassies (8 percent), UN agencies (7 percent) and private sector actors (8 percent), along with a small number from other sectors. This diverse demographic profile underscores the broad scope and inclusivity of the consultation findings. Responses were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative coding of thematic priorities was complemented by in-depth qualitative analysis of participants' narratives, enabling the identification not only of common concerns but also the lived experiences and policy aspirations that underpin them. The results highlight widespread concern with inequality, social protection, governance and climate justice, while underscoring the need for transformative change rooted in equity, rights and sustainability.

2. The Changing Global Social Landscape: Key Challenges

2.1. Growing inequality and social injustice

Inequality and poverty are at the heart of the Copenhagen and Doha declarations (see box 3). In the past several decades, wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the elite, with the top 1 percent holding an unprecedented share of global riches. According to the latest Oxfam (2025) report on wealth inequality, total billionaire wealth grew three times faster in 2024 than in 2023. There were 204 new billionaires worldwide in 2024, bringing their total number to 2,769 (Oxfam 2025). This wealth gap not only exacerbates poverty and social exclusion but undermines the fundamental principles of social justice and equity that are crucial for stable societies, as elite capture of economic and political power compounds inequality and inhibits the policy and institutional change needed to address it (Hujo and Carter 2022). Many countries in the global South struggle with stagnating wages, deteriorating public services and widening economic disparities, as global economic policies, debt burdens and austerity policies continue to limit their fiscal space and development potential. The failure to address the structural drivers of inequality—such as regressive tax policies, weak labour protections and underfunded social programmes—has left millions trapped in poverty. According to recent estimates by the World Bank based on new data, the global extreme poverty rate increased from 9.0 to 10.5 percent for 2022, corresponding to an increase of 125 million in the number of individuals living below the international poverty line, from 712.8 to 838 million (Lønborg et al. 2025).

Box 3. From Copenhagen to Doha: Poverty and inequality

The **Copenhagen Declaration** on Social Development, adopted at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, committed member states to “eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national action and international cooperation.”^a

Taking stock: After 3 decades, 1 billion fewer people live in extreme poverty, however, this trend has been reversed since the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2025, an estimated 808 million people are living in extreme poverty—up from the previous estimate of 677 million—representing 9.9 percent of the world’s population, or 1 in 10 people.^b In 2024, more than 240 million workers lived on less than USD 2.15 per person per day. In 2025, 1.1 billion people live in conditions of multidimensional poverty, experiencing overlapping deprivations in health, education and living standards, and the absolute number of people suffering from hunger remains above 2015 levels, reaching an estimated 638–720 million persons in 2024, 8.2 percent of the world’s population.^b Regarding income inequality, two-thirds of all people live in a country where inequality has increased, and inequality between countries has been on the rise since 2020.^c

The final draft of the **Doha Declaration** acknowledges the continuous challenge of poverty reduction in Art. 2 of the Call for Action, with a special mention of the feminization of poverty (d), the links with inequality (a, d), the importance of social protection (g) and education (e), children (h) and persons with disabilities (j), mobilization of additional finance (c), the social and solidarity economy (n), and new measurement tools such as multidimensional vulnerability index (l) and beyond GDP approaches (k).^d

^a UN 1995; ^b UN 2025; ^c UNDESA 2025b; ^d UNDESA 2025a.

Sources: IATF WSSD2 2025a.

Economic, social and political disparities continue to erode social cohesion and fuel discontent, undermining sustainable development and the foundations of democratic governance. Historical injustices, including colonial legacies, racial discrimination and gender-based exclusion, remain deeply embedded in economic systems, limiting access to resources and opportunities for marginalized communities. Gender inequality persists as a major challenge, with women and gender minorities disproportionately bearing the burden of low wages, unpaid care work and workplace discrimination (Staab et al. 2024). Disparities are further entrenched by structural inequalities linked to age, disability, ethnicity and migration background, which manifest in widespread discrimination, unequal opportunities, and elevated risks of poverty and social exclusion (IATF WSSD2 2025c). Migrants in particular often face intersecting vulnerabilities, including limited access to healthcare, social protection and education, despite playing a critical role in host economies and care systems (UNRISD and MIDEQ 2023).

Globally, these patterns of exclusion are reinforced by a lack of coordinated action to regulate tax havens, curb corporate profiteering and ensure fair global trade policies. As a result, wealth continues to concentrate among a small elite: the top 10 percent of income earners account for over half of global income, while the bottom 50 percent account for just 8 percent (Chancel et al. 2022). In the global South, persistently low levels of social spending and highly unequal domestic resource mobilization limit states' capacity to deliver essential services and promote inclusion. While an average of 16.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) is spent on social security in high-income countries, this figure is just 1.1 percent in low-income countries. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) calculations, low- and middle-income countries need an additional 1.4 trillion USD, or 3.3 percent of the aggregate GDP (2024) of these countries, each year to guarantee a minimum level of social security, of which 2 percent (or 833.4 USD billion) is for basic healthcare alone (Caettano et al. 2024).

These disparities and financing gaps both reflect and deepen long-standing power imbalances between high-income and low-income countries, further entrenching the economic dependency of the global South (Hujo and Fuentes-Nieva 2024; Cobham et al. 2025).

Voices for change¹

“If we are serious about reducing inequality, we must move away from an economy where wealth is concentrated at the top while the rest are left behind. Redistribution is not radical—it is necessary for social stability and justice.”

Inequality was ranked as one of the most important challenges by global participants in the UNRISD global survey, with 15.3 percent of respondents identifying it as the most pressing social challenge. Participants overwhelmingly highlighted economic inequality as a fundamental barrier to social justice, with widening income and wealth disparities exacerbating poverty, limiting access to

¹ Anonymous responses to the UNRISD Global Consultation for the Second World Summit for Social Development.

education, healthcare and employment, and eroding social cohesion. Many stressed the disproportionate impact of inequality on marginalized groups, including women, racial minorities and persons with disabilities, who face systemic barriers to participation, financial stability and social mobility. Gender inequality was repeatedly cited as a key challenge, particularly in terms of leadership representation, wage gaps and unpaid care work, with participants noting that women's exclusion from economic and political decision making reinforces broader inequities. The global South was highlighted as facing severe regional inequalities, where entire populations lack access to quality education, stable jobs and basic social protection, leading to deepening cycles of poverty and economic exclusion. Participants also raised concerns over growing backlash against gender and social justice movements, arguing that political polarization and nationalist ideologies are obstructing efforts to reduce inequalities and promote inclusion. Many called for progressive taxation, fair wages, universal social protection, and stronger legal frameworks to address structural inequalities and create a more equitable and just society.

2.2. Eroding social protection, public services and decent work opportunities

Social protection systems and public services are failing to keep pace with economic and demographic shifts, leaving vast portions of the global population without access, undermining social justice (ILO 2025a). Instead of serving as mechanisms for economic security and social stability, social policies in many countries are being hollowed out by privatization, funding cuts and exclusionary eligibility requirements. Millions of people, particularly in the global South, remain outside formal labour markets, as growth does not necessarily translate into more decent jobs. Two billion people (57.8 percent of the global workforce) are employed in the informal economy—in Africa, informality reaches 85 percent; in South Asia, 74 percent (IATF WSSD2 2025b). Informality often means lack of access to pensions, healthcare and child support, exacerbated by administrative barriers and policy neglect. As a consequence, according to recent data, 47.6 percent of the population, or 3.8 billion people worldwide, lack social security (ILO 2024) and 4.5 billion people have no health insurance; over the past two decades, less than a third of countries have improved health service coverage and reduced catastrophic out-of-pocket health spending (WHO and World Bank 2023). Women, informal workers, migrants and people with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged. Despite marginal progress, female labour force participation remains starkly unequal: in 2023, only 48.7 percent of women were employed, compared to 73 percent of men, a mere three percentage point increase since 1995. People with disabilities face even steeper barriers, with just 27 percent in gainful employment (IATF WSSD2 2025b).

Education systems, which should be engines of social mobility, are increasingly stratified, with poor and rural populations receiving lower-quality instruction, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage (Carter and Hujo 2021). Only one in six countries is expected to achieve universal secondary education by 2030 (UN 2023a). Youth are particularly vulnerable: 20.4 percent of those aged 15–24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET), with limited pathways to decent livelihoods (IATF WSSD2 2025b).

The Covid-19 pandemic further exposed these weaknesses, overburdening fragile healthcare infrastructures, worsening employment precarity and educational divides, and driving millions deeper into poverty. In response, governments enacted temporary relief measures that have since been withdrawn (with few exceptions), leaving vulnerable populations even more exposed to economic shocks and income instability. The failure to institutionalize comprehensive and rights-based social protection has left informal workers, migrants and marginalized communities particularly vulnerable to crises, reinforcing long-standing patterns of exclusion (Cook and Ulriksen 2021; Cruz-Martínez et al. 2023).

UNRISD global consultation participants emphasized the urgent need to strengthen social protection, education, healthcare and employment systems, with 7 percent ranking social protection as a key policy demand, 7 percent prioritizing education, 6 percent focusing on health and well-being, and 7.1 percent emphasizing employment and economic opportunities. These figures highlight the widespread recognition that economic security, access to essential services, and decent work opportunities are fundamental to reducing inequality and ensuring sustainable development.

Participants overwhelmingly highlighted gaps in social protection coverage, particularly in the global South, where informality, underfunding and policy neglect leave millions unprotected. Many survey respondents called for global financing mechanisms to close the gap.

Voices for change

“Universal social protection is not a luxury—it is a necessity to ensure resilience against economic, climate and health crises.”

Gender disparities in social protection persist, with women often excluded from pensions, maternity benefits and employment-linked social security. Climate change-induced displacement and economic shocks further underscore the need for adaptive social protection systems, which are universal, rights-based, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient (IATF WSSD2 2025c; World Bank 2020).

Education remains a key concern, with poor, rural and marginalized populations showing lower attainment rates and receiving lower-quality instruction, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage (UN 2023a, 2025). Participants highlighted gender disparities in education, with girls disproportionately affected by child marriage, early pregnancy and domestic responsibilities. Others criticized outdated curricula and skills mismatches, as education systems fail to prepare youth for labour markets.

Healthcare and well-being ranked as a priority, with concerns over weak public health systems, high costs and lack of universal access. The pandemic exposed deep vulnerabilities, and many stressed that mental health services remain underfunded and inaccessible, particularly for youth. Food insecurity, lack of clean water and malnutrition further exacerbate health disparities.

Employment was the highest-ranked issue, reflecting rising unemployment, informal work and economic insecurity worldwide. Participants highlighted the dominance of informal work, lack of

labour protections and stagnant wages, leaving millions in economic precarity. Young people face limited job prospects, pushing many into exploitative labour conditions or migration.

 Voices for change

“The future of work must be built on dignity, security, and fairness—otherwise, we risk a generation of economic uncertainty and discontent.”

Across these issues, participants urged governments to implement universal social protection, invest strongly in education, expand healthcare access and enact proactive employment policies. Without urgent action, inequality will continue to grow, leaving millions in economic precarity, social exclusion and worsening health conditions.

2.3. Poor governance, democratic backsliding and erosion of human rights

Polarization, mistrust, populism and extremism are on the rise across the globe (UNDP 2024). In many parts of the world, democratic institutions are being systematically weakened as political leaders exploit crises to consolidate power, silence opposition and erode civil liberties. Governance failures—marked by corruption, lack of transparency, lack of respect for rules and institutions, and political repression—are fueling instability and undermining trust in institutions (UNRISD 2022: ch. 2; see box 4). Instead of upholding democratic principles, many governments are using emergency powers, legal loopholes and disinformation to suppress dissent, restrict freedom of the press and curtail civil society participation. Instead of strengthening social contracts, states have increasingly turned to surveillance, militarized policing and legislative rollbacks on civil rights, fostering an environment of repression and fear. This trend is not limited to autocratic states; even in nominal democracies, populist leaders are leveraging economic and social anxieties to justify policies that undermine democratic rules and institutions, curtail human rights, deepen inequalities and foster division (Mounk 2018).

Participants in the UNRISD global survey overwhelmingly pointed to governance failures as a major challenge, with 20.4 percent identifying political instability, corruption and poor policy implementation as critical concerns. Many responses described how ineffective governance has exacerbated economic hardship, weakened social protections and left vulnerable populations without recourse. There was particular concern over the shrinking space for civil society, as governments impose bureaucratic restrictions and financial constraints to limit the influence of human rights organizations, labour unions and grassroots movements.

Where governance fails, people’s basic rights to security, justice and participation in decision-making are eroded, making it easier for ruling elites to maintain control while neglecting or actively undermining the well-being of their populations (UN 2025; UNRISD 2022). The erosion of democracy has been accompanied by a broader backlash against human rights and social justice,

with 1.1 percent of responses to the survey highlighting how governments are increasingly rolling back protections for marginalized groups.

At the same time, anti-rights movements have gained momentum, leveraging cultural anxieties and economic grievances to justify rolling back progress on gender equality, social justice and human rights (UNRISD and UN-Women 2025). Far-right and conservative groups are fueling opposition to reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ protections, racial justice initiatives and inclusive economic policies, arguing that these efforts threaten “traditional values” or economic stability. This has led to a surge in discriminatory policies, restrictions on education curricula and attacks on affirmative action measures. Meanwhile, social movements and civil society organizations, which play a critical role in defending human rights, are facing growing obstacles, ranging from funding restrictions and bureaucratic harassment to outright criminalization. Some participants in the survey warned of the growing influence of extremist ideologies that seek to redefine human rights as privileges rather than universal entitlements. The suppression of women’s rights, attacks on press freedom and the criminalization of activism were cited as direct consequences of this democratic regression.

 Voices for change

“Commit to inclusive policies that protect the most vulnerable. Democracy must be more than elections—it must guarantee dignity for all.”

Discrimination and social exclusion were also recurring themes, with 2.5 percent of responses focusing on the systemic barriers faced by racial minorities, women, LGBTIQ+ communities, migrants and people with disabilities. Many pointed to the rise of exclusionary policies that restrict access to education, healthcare and employment, further entrenching inequality. Women’s empowerment and gender-based violence were mentioned in 3 percent of responses, with participants noting that legal and institutional frameworks often fail to protect survivors or hold perpetrators accountable. Participants stressed that gender inequality is not just a social issue but a political one: where women and gender-diverse individuals are excluded from leadership and decision-making, policies often reinforce patriarchal power structures rather than challenge them (UNRISD 2022: ch. 3).

The role of digital spaces in democratic backsliding was another pressing concern. What were once seen as platforms for civic engagement and mobilization are increasingly being weaponized to spread misinformation, amplify hate speech and undermine public trust in democratic institutions. Disinformation campaigns, often state-sponsored or backed by political interest groups, are shaping public discourse in ways that justify repressive policies and marginalize dissenting voices. Social media has become a tool not only for mass surveillance but also for orchestrating harassment against activists, journalists and human rights defenders. The loss of credible information ecosystems has fueled political polarization, making it easier for authoritarian leaders to justify anti-democratic measures under the guise of national security or social stability (Bontcheva and Posetti 2020; UN 2023b).

Meanwhile, wars, political persecution, and economic and environmental collapse have driven millions from their homes, yet instead of addressing root causes, governments are tightening immigration policies and criminalizing migrants.

With 5 percent of responses focused on migration and human security, many participants pointed out that refugees and asylum seekers are being scapegoated for economic and social challenges, fueling xenophobia and exclusion. The militarization of borders and the restriction of legal migration pathways are exacerbating human rights violations, leaving displaced populations with few options for safety and stability.

As democratic backsliding accelerates, so too does the erosion of human rights and social protection. Survey respondents emphasized the need for international solidarity, stronger human rights protections, and a reinvestment in democratic governance that prioritizes social well-being over political entrenchment, demands that are in line with the Copenhagen and Doha declarations (see box 4).

 Voices for change

“Strengthen international cooperation—solidarity, not isolation, is the only path forward.”

Box 4. From Copenhagen to Doha: Democracy, accountability and human rights

The **Copenhagen Declaration** confirms that democracy and transparent and accountable governance and administration in all sectors of society are indispensable foundations for the realization of social and people-centred sustainable development (Art. 4, Art. 26n). Its vision for social development is based on democracy, equality and human rights (Art. 25, 26f). Commitment 1a) stipulates legal frameworks consistent with international law and obligations, equality and equity between women and men, full respect for all human rights, and transparent and accountable governance and administration. Commitment 4a) calls to promote respect for democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and diversity, tolerance and responsibility, non-violence, and solidarity. Human rights, fundamental freedoms, rule of law and accountable governance are mentioned throughout the Declaration and Programme of Action, with a particular emphasis on protecting human rights for women (C5i, a) and migrants (C42).^a

Taking stock: According to recent UN data, while gaps remain in building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, budget reliability has improved, access-to-information laws have expanded, and more countries have compliant human rights institutions.^b However, killings and disappearances of human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists remained alarmingly high in 2024. One in three prisoners globally are held without proper sentencing.^b Corruption is rampant, with one in five people reporting being asked to pay or having paid a bribe to a public official in the last 12 months.^c With regard to democracy, 94 countries, representing 54 percent of 173 countries assessed by International IDEA (2024), suffered a decline in at least one factor of democratic performance, with rule of law and press freedom most affected.^d In Europe, as elsewhere, trust in political leaders is generally low, with a significant majority of citizens across various countries believing that elected officials seldom keep their promises.^e

The draft **Doha Political Declaration** takes up the language from Copenhagen, stating in Art. 16 that it remains committed to a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for social development that is based on human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace and democracy, and in Art. 24 that it aims to achieve social development through building effective, accountable, transparent and inclusive institutions at all levels; upholding democracy, the rule of law, good governance and access to justice; and combatting all forms of corruption. Endorsement of human rights obligations appears throughout the Doha Declaration (Art. 2, 4, 11, 12, 16, 21, 26) and in the Call to Action, with particular reference to women and girls (Art. 11), migrants (Art. 14b), and houseless persons (Art. 4n), and with regard to digital technologies (Art. 7e).^f

^a UN 1995; ^b UN 2025, ^c UN 2024b, ^d International IDEA 2025; ^e Ipsos 2024; ^f UNDESA 2025a.

2.4. The climate crisis: A triple injustice

Climate change is not only an environmental crisis; it is a profound injustice that exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities (UNRISD 2022; Eknor Akzell et al. 2025). The world's wealthiest nations and industries, responsible for the vast majority of carbon emissions and ecological destruction, continue to reap the benefits of extractive economies, while the costs are disproportionately borne by the global South, Indigenous communities and marginalized populations, particularly low-income communities, women and informal workers (UNRISD and GI-ESCR 2025). These groups are more likely to live in climate-vulnerable areas, rely on precarious livelihoods, and lack access to the resources needed to adapt. Additionally, environmental degradation reinforces gender inequalities, as women, particularly in rural and agrarian economies,

bear the brunt of food insecurity, displacement and unpaid labour burdens. As governments and industries move toward decarbonization, the global shift to a greener economy risks deepening existing disparities unless carefully designed with a just transition approach—one that prioritizes protections for affected workers and communities, ensures inclusive economic planning, and redistributes the costs of adaptation and mitigation to those most responsible for emissions (Morena et al. 2020; Krause et al. 2022).

Climate change was a recurring concern, cited in 13.5 percent of responses to the UNRISD global survey. Participants emphasized its far-reaching consequences for marginalized communities, economic stability and global inequality. The social and economic impacts of climate change were widely acknowledged, with many noting that environmental degradation exacerbates poverty and food insecurity.

Another critical issue raised was climate-induced displacement and migration. Participants highlighted the increasing number of people forced to flee their homes due to extreme weather events, rising sea levels and deteriorating agricultural conditions. Many called for more inclusive migration policies and adaptive social protections to help those displaced by climate change rebuild their lives with dignity. Participants stressed that global migration governance must reflect the reality that environmental crises are driving forced migration at an unprecedented scale.

There was also strong concern about government inaction and corporate responsibility. Participants criticized policy makers for failing to implement meaningful climate action, pointing to weak enforcement of environmental regulations, continued subsidies for fossil fuels and slow progress on emissions reduction (see box 5). There were calls for stronger accountability measures, including holding corporations responsible for pollution and environmental destruction. Many stressed the importance of prioritizing renewable energy investments, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and enforcing stricter environmental protections.

The intersection of climate change and human rights was another significant theme. Participants noted that climate degradation is not just an environmental issue but a fundamental social justice crisis. Marginalized communities, including Indigenous Peoples, women and the urban poor, are among the hardest hit. Participants called for stronger government commitments to climate adaptation, disaster resilience and access to clean energy, particularly in low-income countries.

Lastly, the role of youth and education in climate action was emphasized. Participants pointed to the need for better climate education and youth engagement in decision making. Many felt that younger generations are leading the charge for climate justice, yet their voices are often ignored in high-level policy discussions. Calls were made for governments to integrate climate literacy into school curriculums and create platforms for youth participation in climate governance.

 Voices for change

“Young people are already on the frontlines of climate action, yet they are sidelined in policy decisions that will shape their future. Education systems must equip us with the knowledge and skills to address the climate crisis, and governments must provide real opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making—not just as token voices, but as equal stakeholders in shaping solutions.”

Overall, responses painted a picture of climate change as an escalating global emergency that intersects with economic, social and political injustices. Participants stressed that climate action must be urgent, inclusive and rooted in justice, ensuring that no community is left behind in the transition to a more sustainable and equitable future.

Box 5. From Copenhagen to Doha: Climate change

The **Copenhagen Declaration** on Social Development, adopted at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, did not explicitly focus on climate change. However, it recognized the interdependence of social development, economic progress and environmental sustainability. It also acknowledged that environmental degradation and unsustainable use of natural resources threaten long-term development and emphasized sustainable development as a guiding principle, in line with the 1992 Rio Declaration and Agenda 21.^a Following the Summit, the environmental dimension of development was systematically enshrined in the SDGs and other global agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement.

Taking stock: According to UN data, climate change is accelerating, with 2024 marking the hottest year on record, at approximately 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels. Extreme weather is intensifying, driving the highest climate-related displacement in 16 years and worsening food insecurity, economic loss and instability. Ten years after the Paris Agreement, global greenhouse gas emissions hit a record high of 57.1 gigatons of CO₂ equivalent in 2023, up 1.3 percent from 2022. On a positive side, annual deaths related to disasters dropped by 36 percent to 41,647 compared to 2005–2014 levels, but vulnerability and impacts are increasing.^b

The **Doha Declaration** reaffirms commitments to the SDGs, UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, as well as the principles of the Rio Declaration (Art. 7, 13, 14 of Preamble). It commits member states to build climate resilience and pursue disaster risk reduction to protect lives and livelihoods and ensure just transitions (Art. 9, 10).^c

^a UN 1995; ^b UN 2025; ^c UNDESA 2025a.

3. Key Themes and Policy Priorities for WSSD

3.1. Transformative social policies for sustainable development

Transformative social policy invests in the well-being of people and supports productive, inclusive, just and sustainable development pathways. It emphasizes the key role states play in promoting universal, rights-based social protection (such as pensions or child grants) and social services (such as education and health) for all population groups. It also includes labour market policies that, in tandem with economic policies, seek to promote decent work and productive employment. Implementing transformative social policies in the global South requires overcoming significant obstacles, drawing lessons from country experiences to expand social protection coverage and enhance access to and quality of public services for entire populations. Social policy must also foster the inclusion of marginalized groups, including women, informal workers, rural populations and migrants, who often have limited access to social protection. The profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social protection systems, labour markets and access to essential services has highlighted the urgent need for social policies that promote universal social protection, strengthen public services and ensure economic security for all, particularly for excluded populations. However, expectations that governments would significantly scale-up investments in social policy in the post-Covid era to create more resilient societies for the future have not materialized (Cook and Ulriksen 2021; Cruz-Martínez et al. 2023). Finally, effective approaches must be tailored to agrarian, informal and emergency contexts to ensure broad and equitable access to support systems.

Participants in the UNRISD survey emphasized that addressing the stark inequalities we face today requires more than temporary relief measures. They called for structural transformation that dismantles systemic barriers, redistributes wealth, and guarantees universal access to social protections, public services and dignified employment, demands that were echoed in various regional consultations (see Spotlight on regional perspectives: Why universal social protection?). Social protection emerged as a core concern, with strong calls for universal basic income, child benefits, unemployment insurance and affordable healthcare. Several respondents rejected means-tested approaches that exclude large segments of the population and instead advocated for publicly financed, rights-based systems that ensure economic security for all. Many pointed to evidence that direct cash transfers enable individuals to invest in education, entrepreneurship and community development, rather than reducing work incentives. There were also widespread demands for fair wages, stronger labour protection, and the formalization of informal work, particularly to improve conditions for women, gig workers and other precarious workers. Participants underscored the need for governments to enforce labour rights, ensure fair contracts and regulate corporate practices that prioritize profit over workers' well-being.

 Voices for change

“Social protections should be a right, not a privilege determined by arbitrary means tests that exclude those who need them most. Everyone deserves a safety net that guarantees dignity and economic security.”

Education was repeatedly highlighted as a crucial tool for reducing inequality, with calls for governments to invest in public education, teacher training and equitable school funding. Many emphasized the importance of aligning education with labour market needs through vocational training and lifelong learning, particularly in rural and underserved areas. There were also strong calls to integrate climate literacy, social justice and inclusive economic principles into school curricula.

The rising cost of housing, particularly in urban areas, was another major concern. Participants described how wages have failed to keep up with soaring rents and property prices, pushing many into precarious living conditions. They urged policy makers to enact stronger tenant protections, introduce rent controls where necessary, and regulate speculative real estate investment that drives up costs. Many emphasized that housing should be recognized as a fundamental right rather than a commodity, with governments ensuring access to stable and affordable homes for all.

 Voices for change

“Housing should not be a privilege reserved for the wealthy—it is a fundamental right. Yet, in too many cities, rent prices are soaring while wages remain stagnant, forcing people into precarious living situations. Governments must step in with stronger tenant protections, regulate speculative investment and prioritize affordable housing solutions that put people over profit.”

Gender justice was also recognized as central to broader social transformation. Participants stressed the need for stronger anti-discrimination laws, gender-responsive budgeting and measures to redistribute unpaid care work. They highlighted how economic policies often overlook the contributions of women, particularly in unpaid and informal labour, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Many emphasized that without policies designed to specifically address gender disparities, economic and social justice will remain out of reach.

Ultimately, participants rejected incremental approaches in favour of bold, systemic change. They urged leaders to go beyond symbolic commitments and take decisive action to implement policies that prioritize equity, sustainability and well-being. Transformative social policies must be universal, well-funded and grounded in economic models that serve people and the planet, rather than wealth accumulation and corporate profit. The focus must shift from short-term financial gains to long-term investments in human dignity and collective prosperity.

Spotlight on regional perspectives: Why universal social protection?

To ensure inclusive participation in the process leading up to WSSD2 in 2025, UNRISD, in collaboration with key partners, engaged its global, multi-sector network through the organization of regional consultation meetings. The objective was to understand key concerns and collect effective policy solutions that are tailored to regional, sub-regional and national contexts while reflecting a plurality of approaches and the needs of diverse communities and social groups. Across different regions, the consultations had a very clear outcome: universal social protection is a fundamental component of an inclusive and transformative social development agenda, as it is necessary to enable its core objectives: poverty reduction, full and productive employment, and social inclusion.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, social protection is seen by stakeholders as an essential part of an intersectoral strategy to address persistent informality, growing climate vulnerability, deepening economic divides and protracted inequalities, and an overall erosion of the social contract and human rights. The region has been pioneering important innovations beyond conditional cash transfers, such as “monotributo” mechanisms, that significantly simplify the payment of taxes and social security contributions for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), incentivizing the extension of social protection to their workforce, and the formalization of enterprises and employment. Climate-sensitive social protection policies have also been introduced, for instance Brazil’s Bolsa Verde, underscoring the importance of achieving both social and environmental goals to advance sustainable social development.^a

Stakeholders across Africa highlighted how poverty and hunger, as well as lack of decent work, remain major impediments to social development, driven and exacerbated by high informality and lack of employment—in particular for youth—climate change, lack of access to finance, and socio-political fragility. Social protection is seen as a key policy instrument to promote economic development, income stabilization, redistribution and social cohesion. To ensure social protection systems are able to fulfil this role, stakeholders advocate for accelerating the extension of coverage and expansion of the system beyond cash transfers toward a comprehensive set of rights-based benefits and services. Overall, universal, adequate and comprehensive social protection that is adapted to the national context is seen as crucial in the face of the different transitions the continent faces—demographic, industrial, digital and green—and therefore essential for realizing inclusive social development.^b

In the Arab region, despite modest progress in health, education and infrastructure, stark inequality, fragile governance, widespread informal employment and continuing conflicts still mark the region, while climate stresses are multiplying. Fragmented and underfunded public services, gender inequality, environmental degradation and forced displacement due to conflict or economic barriers impact millions of people in the region. Experts criticized narrow targeting mechanisms and called for universal and rights-based social protection, health, education and care systems. Policy makers were asked to pay attention to potential risks of using artificial intelligence and algorithmic tools in social protection targeting and implementation.^c

In Asia, rapid urbanization, demographic shocks and societal ageing which exacerbate climate crises and gender inequalities are recognized as major collective challenges. The swift growth that has characterized many Asian economies across the region has brought with it widening income and wealth gaps and social exclusion. Strong national social protection systems can contribute to

addressing these inequalities by promoting income security and enabling equitable access to healthcare and long-term care services. Achieving universal social protection is central to ensuring that older persons can benefit from adequate pensions and retire with dignity in a rapidly ageing society, women can have more equitable access to the labour market and to decent employment, parents can receive the support they need to reconcile work and family responsibilities, and no one is left behind in the transition from mostly rural agricultural societies to highly urbanized and digitalized economies. Secondly, progress toward universal social protection means improving the financial sustainability of national systems by, for instance, broadening the contribution and tax base as advanced Asian economies grapple with a shrinking working age population.^d

In Central Asia, experts confirmed that since Copenhagen, the sub-region has become healthier, markedly less poor, and politically and socially stable, with deepening integration processes. Nevertheless, governments' capacities to ensure universal and inclusive social protection, access to quality services, and decent work opportunities were deemed insufficient. Participants highlighted the need to accelerate inclusive economic development and job creation, advance social protection systems, in particular for informal and migrant workers, and promote a shift from poverty alleviation to unlocking human potential.^e

Civil society in the Nordic countries highlighted gaps in securing universal coverage of social protection as a key concern for the development community, despite significant advances in building social protection floors in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Participants considered universal social protection systems and access to public social services as essential to address poverty and inequality and promote inclusive social development. They emphasized that universal systems grounded in legal frameworks and institutions deliver better social outcomes compared to programmes targeted at the poor and foster the social contract needed to finance social protection.^f

Across regions, experts highlighted the importance of human-rights and gender-responsive approaches and the enabling role of democratic governance, accountable institutions, positive economic contexts and a supportive multilateral system. Throughout the consultation, the progressive extension of social protection toward universal coverage has been identified as highly relevant across different contexts. Across all regions, adequate and comprehensive systems that offer social protection across the life course are considered flexible and necessary tools that help people and societies to cope with the multiple transitions that they need to master.

^a UNRISD 2025a; ^b UNRISD 2025b; ^c ESCWA and UNRISD 2025; ^d UNRISD 2025c; ^e Social Policy Lab and UNRISD 2025; ^f UNRISD 2025d.

Source: Moreschi et al. 2025.

3.2. Just transitions to equitable and resilient futures

The causes of climate change and its effects are unequally distributed across the globe, with wealthy nations and individuals bearing responsibility for the majority of emissions while the poor and marginalized are the most likely to suffer the consequences of climate change. Further, climate change induced crisis and environmental degradation impact men and women differently and exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities (Eknor Akzell et al. 2025). As the transition to low-carbon development progresses, policies must be designed to avoid reproducing or exacerbating inequalities. Alternative economic models that harmonize social needs with environmental sustainability need to be combined with just transition approaches to ensure vulnerable groups are benefitting from the transition to a greener world. Just transitions require policy reforms that address the intersecting crises of care and climate while ensuring that the costs associated with transitioning to low-carbon economies are borne primarily by those most responsible for past and present environmental damage (UNRISD and GI-ESCR 2025).

With 12.4 percent of policy asks focusing on climate change and environmental sustainability, participants called for climate justice to be central to green transitions, ensuring developing nations and frontline communities receive the support they need. Some recommended that climate finance must be scaled up through mechanisms like "debt-for-nature" swaps, reducing financial burdens on lower-income countries while funding environmental restoration. Governments must commit to strong environmental protections, sustainable land use and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in adaptation strategies. There were also calls to regulate harmful industries, ban destructive agricultural practices, and increase investment in clean energy alternatives.

Participants emphasized that a just transition must also integrate social protection, ensuring those displaced by climate disasters receive housing, employment and essential services. Climate resilience should be built into social safety nets, with expanded disaster preparedness, financial assistance for at-risk populations, and protections for climate refugees. Investments in sustainable housing, climate-smart agriculture, and resilient infrastructure were seen as critical for long-term stability. Universal access to food, healthcare and education—particularly for women and children—must be prioritized, according to respondents.

Shifting away from fossil fuels must be done in a way that avoids deepening global inequalities. Participants stressed that the green transition should not perpetuate resource extraction and neocolonial economic models. Instead, governments should support community-led renewable energy projects, fund local innovations in clean technology, and ensure fair access to sustainable energy, particularly in the global South. Stronger carbon regulations, progressive taxation to finance climate action, and corporate accountability measures were widely advocated.

A just transition cannot happen in isolation. Wealthier nations must fulfill climate finance commitments, support loss and damage reparations, and uphold legally binding agreements that hold corporations accountable for environmental destruction. Equitable climate policies must ensure that those least responsible for climate change do not continue to bear the costs. By prioritizing

environmental protection, fair climate financing and inclusive policy making, governments can build a future that is sustainable, just and resilient for all (see box 5 and Spotlight on regional perspectives: Advancing eco-social policies and climate justice).

 Voices for change

“Advance a just transition to enhance well-being within planetary boundaries by prioritizing structural changes that support these principles for a fair and sustainable future for everyone, such as respecting human rights and gender equality, and fostering sustainable and equitable societies and economies.”

3.3. Alternative economies for climate, care and inclusion

Our current economic systems create and perpetuate significant inequalities and forms of social exclusion and drive environmental destruction. They devalue reproductive labour such as caregiving and community support, extract wealth from the bottom and concentrate it at the top, and treat the planet as both a limitless source of natural resources and a bottomless sink for waste and emissions. Economic transformation is necessary to ensure that development serves the well-being of all, upholds human rights and promotes social justice within planetary boundaries (UNRISD 2022: ch. 5; CESR 2020). Innovative frameworks must recognize and elevate the role of care in economic systems while promoting sustainable practices that address the diverse needs of communities (ILO 2025b). The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) promotes forms of production, exchange and consumption that protect both people and the planet and can make economies more sustainable and inclusive (Utting 2022, 2015). Nature-based solutions aim to protect biodiversity and promote well-being and social development. To achieve these goals, it is also imperative to rethink and retrofit the role of the state in economic development. This would involve changing relations between states and markets, better governance of global value chains, and new relationships between market actors and communities (Adaman et al. 2003). Measuring the success of these alternative models requires moving beyond traditional indicators like GDP to capture well-being, sustainability and equality.

Participants emphasized the need to tackle income inequality and climate justice together, ensuring economic policies prioritize historically excluded groups. Governments must commit to progressive taxation, wealth redistribution, and financial systems that serve the collective good rather than concentrating power among the wealthy.

Calls were made to move beyond GDP-driven models toward well-being economies that centre sustainability, equity and resilience. This requires investment in regenerative agriculture, circular economies, and local cooperatives that empower communities. Universal basic income and direct financial support for vulnerable populations were highlighted as essential for financial security and inclusive economic participation. To achieve true economic justice, governments must regulate

corporate power, enforce environmental accountability, and ensure development does not come at the expense of social well-being.

🔊 Voices for change

“We cannot keep measuring progress by GDP alone while inequality deepens and communities struggle. It’s time to shift economic priorities toward well-being, fairness and sustainability. Real change means moving beyond symbolic pledges and making bold, structural commitments that redistribute wealth, empower marginalized voices, and build economies that work for everyone, not just the privileged few.”

Respondents emphasized that economic transformation must also recognize the role of unpaid care work, which disproportionately falls on women. Addressing the gender gap requires investments in universal childcare, paid parental leave and support for caregivers, ensuring economic policies do not reinforce traditional inequalities. Policies that guarantee equal pay, leadership opportunities and protection from gender-based violence must be enforced. Participants also called for urgent action to combat discrimination, particularly against women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and racial and ethnic minorities, through stronger anti-discrimination laws and workplace protections.

Global cooperation is crucial to creating fair economic systems that do not perpetuate exploitation, as was made clear in the survey results. Wealthier nations must commit to fair trade, debt relief and funding for sustainable development in the global South. Climate finance should not take the form of loans but rather direct grants and investments in local resilience. Participants also urged leaders to involve grassroots and community voices in decision making, ensuring policies are shaped by those most affected by inequality and climate change. By prioritizing inclusion, care and sustainability, alternative economies can pave the way for a just and equitable future.

Without fundamental changes in how economies are structured—including reforms in global value chains, investment in nature-based solutions, and a transition toward sustainable and inclusive production models—the pursuit of economic growth will continue to come at the expense of both people and the planet. Moving beyond GDP as the sole measure of success and integrating well-being, sustainability and social equity into economic governance and entrepreneurial decision making are crucial steps toward reversing this cycle of exploitation.

🔊 Voices for change

“An economy that prioritizes endless growth over human well-being and planetary health is an economy built to fail. We need policies that center people’s needs—access to healthcare, education and dignified work—rather than policies that only serve markets and corporate profits.”

Spotlight on regional perspectives: Advancing eco-social policies and climate justice

As climate change and environmental degradation increasingly intersect with social and economic vulnerabilities, regional consultations conducted by UNRISD and partners in the lead-up to WSSD2 in 2025 revealed strong support for eco-social policies that simultaneously advance environmental sustainability, equity and social well-being. While climate risks vary across regions, participants overwhelmingly emphasized the need for context-specific, rights-based and inclusive approaches that embed social justice into climate policy and ensure no one is left behind in green transitions.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, stakeholders called for eco-social policies that address the dual challenge of environmental degradation and entrenched inequality. Climate change disproportionately affects rural and Indigenous communities, threatening livelihoods and biodiversity. Participants highlighted the importance of integrating environmental sustainability into national development strategies. Eco-social policies combining social and environmental goals, such as Bolsa Verde in Brazil or Payment for Ecosystem Services programmes implemented in various countries, were considered as innovative examples to promote sustainable social development. Proposed approaches included green job creation, support for marginalized communities in climate adaptation, and governance reforms to ensure inclusive participation and accountability in environmental decision making.^a

In Africa, participants highlighted how climate-related shocks, such as droughts, floods and rising temperatures, are intensifying vulnerabilities across the continent. Communities dependent on agriculture and natural resources face displacement, food insecurity and rising poverty due to the lack of adequate adaptation measures. Stakeholders stressed the urgent need for climate-resilient agricultural practices, improved infrastructure and social protection policies that prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations. Calls were also made for financial and technological support from high-emission countries, recognizing the historical responsibilities of the global North in driving climate change. At the same time, participants emphasized that formalizing informal work and creating green, decent jobs—particularly for youth and women—will be crucial for building resilience and ensuring that Africa's development pathways are both sustainable and equitable.^b

In the Arab region, participants emphasized that climate stresses are multiplying. Across the region, environmental degradation and climate shocks including droughts, floods, water scarcity and disease are devastating lives and livelihoods, especially among those living in poverty and rural populations. Meanwhile, climate policies remain siloed, technocratic and socially blind. Experts asked to integrate climate justice with social protection, especially for rural and informal workers; to promote climate justice through combatting inequality; and to move climate finance away from non-concessional loans toward grants, concessional loans and innovative climate finance instruments.^c

In Asia, participants emphasized the region's growing vulnerability to climate-related risks, including extreme weather events, floods and landslides that are increasingly disrupting agriculture, infrastructure and livelihoods. Stakeholders advocated for integrating climate adaptation strategies with social protection systems, to both expand coverage and enhance resilience among affected populations. Additionally, participants highlighted the potential of payments for ecosystem services (PES)—such as reforestation and mangrove restoration—as dual strategies that protect the environment while supporting livelihoods, especially in rural and coastal communities.^d

Central Asia is considered one of the most vulnerable regions for climate change, and environmental risks could affect the livelihoods of millions of people. However, participants considered their countries' preparedness to these risks as low. Respondents warned that climate and water insecurity threaten to reverse hard-won gains, urging that adaptation financing and disaster-risk insurance be written into any regional poverty strategy for Central Asia.^e

Civil society in the Nordic countries echoed these concerns, identifying the environmental crisis as a core challenge requiring more robust multilateral cooperation and equitable policy frameworks. Respondents emphasized the importance of a just transition, arguing that universal social policies and rights-based governance are crucial to ensuring climate policies do not reinforce existing inequalities. They also stressed the importance of inclusive democratic spaces and strong civil society advocacy to hold governments and corporations accountable for environmental harm.^f

Across all regions, participants emphasized that climate policy cannot be treated as separate from social policy. Rather, the transition to sustainability must be equitable, democratic and empowering, delivering both environmental and social outcomes. Eco-social policies were repeatedly highlighted as essential tools to achieve this balance, with calls for international solidarity, local ownership, and stronger links between global climate frameworks and inclusive development agendas.

^a UNRISD 2025a; ^b UNRISD 2025b; ^c ESCWA and UNRISD 2025; ^d UNRISD 2025c; ^e Social Policy Lab and UNRISD 2025; ^f UNRISD 2025d.

3.4. Economic governance and fair fiscal contracts

The provision of universal social policies requires a strong fiscal base. For many low-income countries, this will not be possible without strong support from the international donor community (Cattaneo et al. 2024). However, domestic financing schemes are the better option in the long term, as progressive distributional impacts support social integration by creating a social contract and strengthening relations within society, between economic sectors, between rich and poor, between different social groups, and between society and governments (Hujo and Bangura 2020). A fiscal contract for the SDGs should favour financial instruments which are supportive of environmental goals and the sustainability transition (UNRISD 2016). Fair fiscal contracts must ensure that resources for climate action and sustainable development are raised equitably and allocated effectively. A just financial system requires progressive tax policies, strong domestic resource mobilization, and global reforms that prevent tax avoidance and illicit financial flows (Cobham et al. 2025; Hujo and Fuentes-Nieva 2024). Mineral-dependent economies must transition away from extractive industries without jeopardizing fiscal stability, and international financial structures must be reformed to prioritize the needs of the global South. Economic governance should facilitate sustainable development by redistributing resources fairly and preventing the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few.

Participants in the UNRISD survey highlighted persistent inequalities in global taxation, pointing to loopholes that allow multinational corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid their fiscal

responsibilities. Many called for stronger enforcement of progressive tax policies, arguing that revenue generation should not fall disproportionately on lower-income populations while the ultra-rich accumulate wealth unchecked. Proposals included introducing a global minimum tax for multinational corporations, stricter regulations to prevent tax evasion, and eliminating financial havens that facilitate illicit financial flows. There was a strong consensus that tax justice should be a cornerstone of fiscal policy, ensuring that the wealthiest contributors bear a fair share of the financial burden for social and environmental initiatives.

 Voices for change

“We live in a world where the wealthiest corporations and individuals shift profits across borders to avoid taxes, while everyday workers are expected to shoulder the burden of public services. Governments must close these loopholes, enforce fair taxation and ensure the ultra-rich pay their share—because a system that allows billionaires to hoard wealth while communities struggle is fundamentally broken.”

The issue of sovereign debt and fiscal constraints in developing countries was also central to responses. Participants emphasized that the existing financial system often forces low- and middle-income countries into cycles of debt repayment, diverting essential resources away from investments in education, healthcare and climate resilience. Many urged for debt relief measures, arguing that unsustainable debt obligations hinder economic development and exacerbate inequalities. Proposed solutions included restructuring debt frameworks to allow for sustainable repayment plans, implementing international mechanisms that prioritize development over debt servicing, and expanding fiscal space for the global South to pursue independent economic policies without external pressure.

Economic governance reforms at both national and international levels were seen as essential to achieving fair fiscal contracts. Participants underscored the need for policies that actively redistribute wealth through taxation and public investment in social services. There were calls for strengthening fiscal transparency and accountability to prevent mismanagement and corruption in public spending. Recommendations included enhanced monitoring of public fund allocations, participatory budgeting processes that involve civil society, and mechanisms to ensure that financial resources are directed toward equitable and sustainable development.

Many also emphasized the need for resource-rich countries to transition away from dependence on fossil fuels and extractive industries while safeguarding fiscal stability. This would require creating alternative revenue streams through green taxation, investing in renewable energy sectors, and ensuring that economic diversification efforts are inclusive and equitable. Participants stressed that financial and technical support from wealthier nations and international institutions would be necessary to facilitate this transition in a way that does not disproportionately impact vulnerable populations.

A fair fiscal system must prioritize people over profits, ensuring that economic policies serve the collective well-being rather than reinforcing existing inequalities. Strengthening international cooperation to combat financial abuses, redesigning taxation systems to be more progressive, and ensuring that fiscal policies support inclusive economic growth were among the key recommendations. By implementing these measures, governments can create an economic framework that funds climate action, advances the SDGs and promotes long-term social justice.

3.5. Reforming global governance: Decolonial approaches

The current situation of multiple crises and instability has challenged our system of global governance, multilateralism and international solidarity. Governments are turning inward and becoming more nationalist, moving away from multilateralism and questioning the value of global cooperation and solidarity, which are at the heart of the Copenhagen and Doha declarations. On the other side of the spectrum, calls are getting louder to strengthen rules and regulations that would re-embed the global economy into social and ecological norms, to decolonize global governance and increase the weight of the global South in international relations and the global economy, to empower civil society's voice and impact in multilateralism, and to foster solidarity and new values (UNRISD 2022; Martens 2025). Decoloniality, in this context, refers to a critical perspective that challenges the enduring power structures, knowledge hierarchies and institutional legacies established through colonialism and other extractive and oppressive systems. It exposes how dominant models of development and governance—rooted in Euro-American modernity—continue to marginalize alternative worldviews, reproduce inequality, and constrain the agency of formerly colonized peoples and countries. Decolonial thinking urges a shift toward more pluralistic and equitable systems that value diverse knowledge systems, reflect historical injustices and are shaped in collaboration with those most affected by global disparities (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; UNRISD 2022: ch. 4). Multilateral governance remains skewed toward the priorities of the global North, often overlooking the structural legacies of colonialism and economic exploitation. Addressing these injustices requires rejecting one-size-fits-all development models and prioritizing solutions co-created with affected communities and countries.

Eco-social transformations at regional, national and local levels can be strengthened through reforms of the multilateral system and stronger international cooperation and solidarity (UNRISD 2022: ch. 5). Global economic and political structures must be reformed to address tax competition and evasion while improving social and environmental standards across global value chains. The concentration of economic and political power among global business elites must be reined in to strengthen redistribution and international cooperation. Climate policy frameworks need restructuring to ensure more effective and equitable responses to environmental challenges, acknowledging the UNFCCC principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and the triple injustice associated with the climate crisis. Expanding policy space for states, particularly in the global South, is essential. Governments must take an active developmental role, leveraging international collaboration to address systemic inequalities and build resilient, sustainable societies (AUC et al. 2024).

With regard to the international level, calls for a more inclusive and just global governance system were prominent (see Spotlight on regional perspectives: Reimagining multilateralism for inclusive social development). Participants in the UNRISD survey demanded greater representation of marginalized communities from both the global North and South in policy dialogues and decision-making processes, arguing that current structures remain dominated by elite voices who fail to represent those most affected by inequality. Many urged world leaders to move beyond rhetoric and take concrete steps to close North-South economic divides, address debt burdens on poorer nations, and establish fairer trade practices that do not perpetuate economic dependency. There were widespread demands for debt relief, progressive global taxation, and stronger regulations on corporate tax avoidance to ensure that resources are distributed more equitably. Many called for increased representation of historically marginalized communities in global governance spaces, arguing that economic policies should be shaped by those most affected by inequality rather than elites who maintain the status quo.

 Voices for change

“Debt burdens keep poorer nations trapped in cycles of dependency while the world’s richest accumulate unchecked wealth. We need debt relief, not more loans with strings attached, and global tax reforms that ensure corporations and billionaires contribute their fair share.”

Civil society plays a crucial role in advancing human rights and social justice, yet remains sidelined in global decision making. Participants stressed the importance of institutionalizing civil society engagement in international forums, ensuring grassroots movements and marginalized communities have meaningful influence over policies that affect them. Many also called for stronger enforcement of international environmental agreements and legally binding commitments to climate finance, particularly for adaptation and mitigation efforts in the global South.

The Pact for the Future emphasizes the need for structural transformation of the multilateral system, but participants underscored that real change requires more than rhetoric. In this vein, governments and multilateral institutions must take concrete steps to dismantle entrenched power asymmetries, expand representation, and ensure that global governance prioritizes equity, sustainability, and collective well-being over short-term economic gains. Only through inclusive and accountable governance can the international community effectively address today’s most urgent challenges and build a just and resilient future.

 Voices for change

“Multilateralism should serve the many, not the few. Right now, the global economic system is designed to benefit elites, while working people, small farmers and informal workers are left behind. Trade rules must prioritize livelihoods and sustainability over corporate profit.”

Spotlight on regional perspectives: Reimagining multilateralism for inclusive social development

Across all UNRISD-led regional consultations, participants voiced a clear and urgent call to rethink the foundations of multilateralism. They emphasized that in a context of deepening inequalities, climate breakdown and eroding public trust, a revitalized and more equitable multilateral system must move beyond symbolic commitments and become a genuine vehicle for inclusive, accountable and transformative global cooperation.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, stakeholders emphasized that multilateralism must prioritize accountability, equity and voice. They called for stronger mechanisms to monitor and enforce global commitments, including those related to inequality and social development. Participants stressed the importance of amplifying marginalized voices, including Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, and strengthening regional and South-South cooperation to align policies and mobilize resources. Multilateral institutions were seen as crucial platforms for supporting inclusive political alliances, resisting regressive trends and rebuilding public trust through transparency, democratic participation and effective enforcement.^a

In the Arab region, participants expressed scepticism that WSSD2 would go beyond rhetorical repetition. They urged a more courageous and politically honest declaration that acknowledges the legitimacy crisis and fragmentation of the current multilateral system. Specific demands included the inclusion of conflict-affected, occupied and low-income states in shaping global agendas—not just high-income donors—and the reaffirmation of the right to development. Respondents called for clear, time-bound commitments, enforced accountability mechanisms, debt relief, tax justice and serious efforts to address the root causes of displacement and migration, framed within a broader call for migration justice.^b

In Africa, participants stressed the need for systemic reform of global governance structures to reduce the continent's economic dependency and promote more equitable development. There was a strong push to ensure that African priorities and normative values are fully reflected in multilateral forums and that the special focus on Africa outlined in the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration be retained in the WSSD2 outcome document. Participants called for enhanced support for national and regional strategies, alongside mechanisms to facilitate cross-regional learning and promote inclusive, Africa-led transitions. A just global order, they argued, requires greater solidarity and structural change, not continued reliance on residual social policy models or fragmented aid efforts.^c

In Asia, experts highlighted that multilateralism must evolve to address rapid transformations and structural imbalances, from digitalization and climate shocks to entrenched inequalities. They emphasized the importance of new global regulatory frameworks to manage the societal impacts of technology—particularly on employment, ethics and privacy—as well as robust global tax cooperation and development standards. The role of local and subnational actors in multilateral processes was emphasized, alongside the need to facilitate bottom-up approaches in conflict-affected areas that prioritize justice, community empowerment and participatory governance. Participants also called for aid frameworks free from hidden geopolitical agendas, and for South-South learning, regional coordination and stronger knowledge sharing mechanisms that reflect the diversity of the region.^d

In Central Asia, contributors expressed frustration with top-down, technocratic international interventions that fail to respond to the realities of poverty and local needs. Instead, they called for transformative partnerships co-designed with national actors and embedded in local knowledge and ownership. Participants advocated for a shift from fragmented short-term projects to long-term, inclusive development strategies aligned with national goals and the SDGs. A strong emphasis was placed on capacity building and institutional strengthening, particularly in governance, civic engagement and human rights. Donor behaviour also came under scrutiny, with critiques of neoliberal policy conditionalities and poor coordination. Multilateral actors, they argued, must act as facilitators of meaningful regional cooperation and support predictable, coordinated and accountable development financing.^e

From the Nordic region, civil society actors emphasized that multilateralism cannot be rebuilt without restoring its human rights foundations and democratic legitimacy. Civil society was seen as a vital bridge between marginalized groups and policy-making spaces, with a role to play in monitoring government commitments, promoting inclusive narratives, and building global alliances for equity and solidarity. The Nordic experience of building egalitarian welfare states was offered as a valuable reference point for global deliberations. Participants also highlighted the importance of civil society-led advocacy and communication, using evidence-based tools to counter backlash and foster collective ownership of international development commitments.^f

Together, these regional insights reflect a shared understanding that multilateralism must be democratized, decolonized and reimagined. This means addressing global power asymmetries, ensuring greater voice and agency for the global South, marginalized communities and civil society, and establishing mechanisms for accountability, participation and solidarity. A reformed multilateral system must move beyond technical fixes and respond to the deeper challenges of legitimacy, equity, inclusion and trust that undermine its ability to serve global needs.

^a UNRISD 2025a, 2025e; ^b UNRISD 2025b; ^c ESCWA and UNRISD 2025; ^d UNRISD 2025c; ^e Social Policy Lab and UNRISD 2025; ^f UNRISD 2025d.

4. Harnessing the Doha Declaration and going beyond: Toward a Renewed Commitment to Social Development

In a context of global uncertainty and converging crises, WSSD2 must be an inflection point, a decisive shift toward a new era for social progress, rooted in economic equity, environmental justice and social well-being. It must go beyond reaffirming past agreements and deliver concrete, time-bound commitments that reflect the urgency of today's moment. Achieving this will require strong political commitments, multi-stakeholder collaboration and robust accountability mechanisms. Success should not be measured solely by pledges but by their tangible impact on marginalized communities and progress toward the 2030 Agenda. If the Doha declaration creates the momentum needed to recentre social development on political agendas at national and global levels, it has the potential to catalyze a new eco-social contract—one that restores public trust and advances a shared vision for people and planet. This paper has drawn on insights from the UNRISD global survey and expert consultations in key world regions to illuminate contemporary social development challenges that the WSSD2 must address, reflecting on what has worked—and what has not—since Copenhagen, and articulating the policy transformations required to close implementation gaps and respond to emerging crises, including climate change, conflict, demographic shifts, digital disruption and rising inequalities.

The Doha declaration, building on Copenhagen, goes a long way toward reaffirming existing commitments and key normative principles such as human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace, democracy, mutual responsibility and cooperation, and endorsing newer frameworks such as Agenda 2030, the Paris Agreement, UNFCCC and ILO standards. In doing so, it underlines the potential of multilateralism to reach consensus between member states in challenging times.

However, the Declaration falls short in several critical areas raised by stakeholders and respondents throughout the UNRISD consultations. While it outlines aspirations, it lacks clear implementation pathways, financing mechanisms and accountability structures. It does not sufficiently address entrenched structural inequalities or propose mechanisms to rebalance global power asymmetries, nor does it reflect the full scope of transformative demands—from feminist economics to care-centred systems, debt justice, corporate accountability, or integrated policy approaches such as eco-social policies—that many participants articulated. Without a strong follow-up mechanism (IATF WSSD2 2025d) and deeper engagement with civil society and marginalized voices, there is a risk that the Declaration will remain a symbolic gesture rather than a roadmap for change.

To avoid this outcome, implementation of the Doha declaration must be swift, bold and as ambitious as possible, taking the new consensus as a floor, not a ceiling. What is needed now is to move beyond expressions of intent to time-bound, measurable commitments and concrete implementation strategies, based on policy and institutional reforms that reflect a broad societal consensus, built from the bottom-up and driven forward by political leaders committed to the values and objectives they have subscribed to in Doha. UNRISD and partners have developed the concept of a new eco-social contract (UNRISD 2021; Huntjens et al. 2025), societal agreements that ensure a

just coexistence between humans and between humans and the natural world at local, national, global and transnational levels, and which reflect the outcome of democratic and inclusive policy negotiations grounded in shared values such as human rights, social justice and equality. New eco-social contracts call for regenerative, care-centred, and relational economies that prioritize the well-being of people and planet over endless material expansion and unsustainable growth (Huntjens et al. 2025). A new eco-social contract should be instrumental in reconfiguring a range of relationships that have become sharply imbalanced—those between state and citizens, between capital and labour, between the global North and the global South, and between humans and the natural environment. It will be based on rebalancing hegemonic gender roles and relations rooted in patriarchy, remedying historical injustices, and strengthening solidarity and multilateralism (UNRISD 2021, 2022).

📣 Voices for change

“The future of social development depends on action—not just commitments. Governments must be held accountable for implementation.”

4.1 Recommendations: From consensus to transformation

Drawing on the consultations and underpinned by research evidence, UNRISD calls on governments, multilateral institutions and civil society actors to forge a renewed and inclusive commitment to social development.

Governments and policy makers:

- Strengthen labour rights, guarantee decent work and implement universal social protection systems that cover all life stages, with particular attention to informal workers, migrants, persons with disabilities, children, older persons and women.
- Invest in high-quality public services—including education, healthcare, care systems and digital infrastructure—to promote social integration and inclusive development.
- Reduce inequalities through predistribution and redistribution policies and intersectional approaches.
- Advance economic justice through progressive tax systems and fair fiscal policies and mobilize domestic and external resources in line with the Sevilla commitment and the Doha declaration.
- Enhance participatory governance and transparent and accountable institutions while strengthening democracy and combatting authoritarianism, backlash and extremism.

International organizations and multilateral bodies:

- Facilitate debt relief and reform the international financial architecture to expand fiscal space and autonomy for low- and middle-income countries.

- Develop inclusive global governance structures that address power asymmetries, especially for countries and communities historically marginalized in multilateral processes.
- Promote South-South and triangular cooperation, knowledge sharing, and capacity building to support context-specific solutions.
- Strengthen UN-led governance reforms to advance human rights, foster democracy and reduce power asymmetries at global and national levels.
- Ensure the institutionalization of meaningful civil society participation within multilateral spaces and policy follow-up mechanisms.

Civil society and social movements:

- Mobilize grassroots advocacy for economic, environmental and social justice.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral alliances for feminist, decolonial and climate-just social development frameworks.
- Push for accountability mechanisms, transparency, inclusive processes and rights-based implementation of Doha commitments.
- Elevate the voices of marginalized groups and youth in global policy processes, ensuring that their experiences and solutions shape future multilateral agendas.
- Actively monitor WSSD2 outcomes to ensure governments' accountability to their commitments.

Thirty years after Copenhagen, WSSD2 represents a critical opportunity to redefine global solidarity for a new era. To meet the challenges of our time, the international community must move beyond incrementalism and embrace bold, values-driven action that centres justice—social, economic, environmental and gender—as the foundation of global cooperation. The voices captured in this report point to a clear path forward rooted in dignity, equality, inclusion and sustainability. Realizing this vision will require not only political will, but also ambitious co-creation, hopeful reimagining and radical accountability.

 Voices for change

“We need more than words. The time for inclusive and sustainable action is now.”

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