

GLOBAL STUDY ON NEW ECO-SOCIAL CONTRACTS



UNRISD

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The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the United Nations system that undertakes interdisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

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The Green Economy Coalition is the largest global movement for green and fair economies. Our members represent diverse constituencies, united by our shared recognition that our economic system is no longer fit for purpose.

Foreword

Time is short. A global polycrisis of climate, inequality, conflict and biodiversity collapse is accelerating. To address it, we need innovation—not just at the technological level, but at the level of society. We must transform our societies and our economies within a single generation. As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in April 2023 when launching a special edition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) progress report, to achieve the SDGs at the national and international levels, we must strengthen the social contract and steer our economies toward a green transition.

But our societies will not just transform themselves, and powerful interests are fighting hard to maintain the status quo. What is needed are new mechanisms that can engage all stakeholders, allow fair and honest debate, and build a powerful citizen's mandate for positive social change.

To support this necessary transformation, UNRISD has partnered with the Green Economy Coalition to co-convene the “Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract.” The group is now almost two years old and already has over 350 members from research, practice, advocacy and policy decision-making communities working for social, climate and environmental justice across the world.

In the first two years, members of the network organized themselves in thematic working groups related to seven principles for a new eco-social contract. Discussions about transforming economies and societies, addressing historical injustices, creating a contract with nature, and promoting human rights and gender justice were the grounds on which a wealth of research papers, briefings and blogs was produced. As new members continue to

join the network, new working groups will inevitably emerge to broaden the scope of the discussions and to focus on key actors and stakeholder groups, such as Indigenous peoples, youth, women and people with disabilities.

Furthermore, the network aims to scale up the awareness of new eco-social contracts in the transition toward a sustainable and inclusive future. For this reason, network members presented their findings at key international events such as the Peoples Global Summit 2022, the 60th Commission for Social Development and the Stockholm+50 meeting, to mention only a few examples, in addition to organizing a number of well-attended webinars and meetings.

This global study is a vital compendium of emerging questions and answers from our work together over the last two years. It displays a selection of 13 written pieces—issue briefs and blogs—that reflect the range of perspectives that the network aims to advance. We know what we need to do, and the only remaining question is how we do it. If you are interested in how change happens, how societies renew themselves and how citizens can lead the way, join us in the network to make it happen.



Oliver Greenfield

Convenor, Green Economy Coalition



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About this Report

The *Global Study on New Eco-Social Contracts* is a digital volume that features several short articles, issue briefs and blogs as well as podcasts and videos that were produced as part of UNRISD's work on new eco-social contracts. It is a flagship activity of the UNRISD Bonn office in collaboration with UNRISD research programmes and our communications and outreach division. The UNRISD Bonn office aims to promote research uptake in policy and practice through building partnerships, networks and alliances, and building capacity for sustainable and inclusive development.

The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the position of UNRISD. The designations employed in this publication and the presentation of material herein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNRISD concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

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The Urgent Need for a New Eco-Social Contract

Introduction

Katja Hujo
Isabell Kempf
Rafael Ponte

The world is once more at a critical juncture and decisions taken today will have important impacts on the future of humanity. Multiple crises and rising inequalities have undermined social contracts in various parts of the world, prompting UN Secretary-General António Guterres to state in his recent “Our Common Agenda” report that our social contract is broken. But what is meant by our social contract? Which factors have led to its breakdown? And how can we change course? These questions have long guided UNRISD’s work, crystalizing in our

proposal for a *new eco-social contract* which combines a reformed social contract for inclusion and justice with a contract for nature and future generations that has long been missing in our modern societies.

A social contract can be defined as the explicit and implicit agreements between state and citizens defining rights and obligations to ensure legitimacy, security, rule of law and social justice. This represents an ideal vision of the social contract, which does not necessarily materialize in the real world. Indeed,



VIDEO

Why We Need a New Eco-Social Contract for Just and Green Recovery from Covid-19

In this video, we explore how to build solidarity between different actors and movements who are working toward a new eco-social contract and a just and green recovery from Covid-19, by integrating different perspectives on social, climate and environmental justice. The event drew on Finland's experience of an eco-welfare state and on UNRISD's work on the need for a new eco-social contract.

→ [Click here to watch](#)

existing real-world social contracts have often been exclusionary, representing dominant powers in society rather than common interests or *the commons* such as nature. The twentieth-century social contract, while delivering social progress and greater well-being for many, left others behind and ignored planetary boundaries. What are the key features and objectives of a new eco-social contract vision?

First, it needs to be grounded in broad societal consensus and present a road-map for society, redefining rights and obligations for citizens, business actors and the state. We therefore need democratic participatory processes and dialogue to negotiate our social contracts so that both processes and outcomes are legitimate and representative of broader public interest instead of bargains that represent the interests of the few.

Second, it must reflect a clear normative basis in line with the UN Charter, human rights and the principles of solidarity and justice. [UNRISD's suggestion for a new eco-social contract](#) is one that is grounded in these values and representative of state-society relations that are accountable. It contributes to sustainable development for people and the planet by reinvigorating various principles, importantly the inclusion of groups that have either been excluded or included on less favourable terms, for example, women; informal workers; ethnic, racial and religious minorities; Indigenous peoples; migrants; and refugees. New eco-social contracts must raise sufficient resources in an equitable way, have an economic model that is just and sustainable, and establish a new relationship with nature that protects biodiversity and promotes climate stability.

Finally, creating new eco-social contracts requires redressing historical injustices by decolonizing knowledge and fostering social, climate and gender justice, and promoting new solidarities at local, national and global levels.

Embarking on a process of designing new contracts for social and climate justice should become a priority in all countries and communities. This process can be supported through a number of activities, from awareness raising and agenda setting; to forging of coalitions and alliances; creating spaces for deliberation and the sharing of ideas and experiences; and producing knowledge, research and evidence-based policy guidance. This compendium, the *Global Study on New Eco-Social Contracts*, contributes to the latter objective and aims to make a wealth of innovative thinking and analysis available for key stakeholders around the world, supporting eco-social contracting in the making.

The *Global Study* is a digital volume featuring several short articles, issue briefs and blogs that were produced as part of UNRISD research and outreach activities on the concept and dimensions of a new eco-social contract. It presents new case studies of countries, sectors and communities where social contracts have been or are in the process of being renegotiated. It further aims to increase visibility of the [Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract](#), a multidisciplinary group that advocates for rethinking and renegotiating social contracts and which UNRISD co-leads in partnership with the [Green Economy Coalition](#), supporting joint advocacy goals.

The volume contains various contributions from network members—researchers, practitioners and activists working for social, economic and environmental justice. The contributions aim to catalyse debates and knowledge exchange. They explore examples of twenty-first-century eco-social contracts and the processes driving them; draw on pluralistic approaches; produce context-specific solutions and give renewed visibility to local value systems and communitarian imaginaries; and suggest pathways to harmonize our relationships with nature and future generations. They identify what must be done to ground social contracts in democratic and participatory processes that provide necessary legitimacy and buy-in.

A roadmap of the study: Visions, participatory design and implementation of eco-social contracts

The Global Study contains 13 articles as well as multimedia sources such as podcasts and videos. It features seven blogs from the series *The Time is Now! Why We Need a New Eco-Social Contract for a Just and Green World*, originally launched as part of UNRISD's activities to support a fair and sustainable recovery from multiple crises in the context of the publication of its flagship report, *Crisis of Inequality: Shifting Power for a New Eco-Social Contract*. In this blog series, we invited experts from academia, advocacy and policy practice to critically explore the various manifestations of our broken social contracts, the root causes of breakdown and the role of rising inequalities, as well as the drivers of positive change. They explored not only which policies and institutional reforms are needed, but also which actors can do what to overcome inequalities and build greater social and climate justice. What are the values, mindsets, political alliances and social movements needed to build a new eco-social contract?

The volume also includes six issue briefs on selected topics relevant for an informed debate on eco-social contracts, ranging from communitarian philosophies on eco-social contracts to civil society activism and just transitions.

The final version of the compilation will also include a number of UNRISD working papers which have been prepared in response to a call for papers that UNRISD and the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract launched in relation to the [Global Policy Seminar for a New Eco-Social Contract](#), held in Bonn 29–30 August 2023.

The compilation is organized around three themes:

1. Visions for new eco-social contracts
2. Pathways for participatory eco-social contracting
3. Implementing eco-social contracts: Challenges and opportunities

1. Visions for new eco-social contracts

Several contributions compiled here delve into the concept of the social contract, its origins, different manifestations across space and time, as well as debates on how our current social contract can be reformed to become an eco-social one.

The issue brief “A New Eco-Social Contract: Vital to Deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” by Katja Hujo, sets the scene by first acknowledging the diversity of social contracts that exist in different places and that have existed in various time periods. The brief explains the adverse impacts of market-liberal approaches on social contracts and magnifies some of the shortcomings of the twentieth-century social contract which, despite its achievements, has failed to be fully inclusive and environmentally sustainable. It suggests that a vision of a new eco-social contract should not only include a series of universal principles but also reflect a reconfiguration of a range



of relationships that have become sharply imbalanced.

The diversity of social contracts is also addressed in the issue brief “Going Beyond the Social: Communitarian Imaginaries as Inspirations for Rethinking the Eco-Social Contract?” by Manisha Desai. This piece explores three communitarian imaginaries—Ubuntu (Southern Africa), Eco-swaraj (South Asia) and Sumak kawsay (Latin America)—as potential inspirations for a new eco-social contract. It identifies the positive potential for rethinking economic models, life systems and forms of solidarity, as well as pitfalls associated with these communitarian philosophies, in particular when they are instrumentalized by political actors with specific interests.

The shift from an ego-centric to an eco-centric social contract requires a fundamental reassessment of the purpose, goal and vision of our societies and economies, and what this means for the relationship between people, between people and the powerful, and between people and nature. Without nature our economies cannot function and our societies cannot survive. The issue brief “Dismantling the Ecological Divide: Toward a New Eco-Social Contract,” by Najma Mohamed and Patrick Huntjens, considers the critical pathways needed to build a world where all life flourishes, and identifies possible avenues to break from the dominant social paradigm fuelling the ecological divide, one of the greatest fault lines of our time.



“Joining Up the Dots Between Social and Climate Justice: Time for a New Eco-Social Contract,” by Katja Hujó and Isabell Kempf, is the introductory blog to the UNRISD think piece series on eco-social contracts. It presents the reasons why a new eco-social contract needs to sustain the vision of the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development, leaving no one behind and safeguarding nature. Rather than fixing what was never a truly inclusive, ecological or equitable social contract, the authors argue that now is the time for a fundamental rethink of the principles and values that guide our societies and economies. This requires a process of meaningful participation, deliberation and negotiation in different places and at various levels with all stakeholders to commit to new eco-social contracts which are fully inclusive, grounded in human rights, respect planetary boundaries, and support new forms of solidarity and justice.

The move toward a human rights-based economy is essential for building a new eco-social contract, argue Ohene Ampofo-Anti and Alina Saba in the think piece “How a Rights-Based Economy Can Help Us Overcome the Social, Economic and Environmental Challenges of Our Time.” The multiple crises triggered by climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, unjust economic systems and the conflict in Ukraine have reignited discussions on transforming the current economic system into one that works for both people and the planet. The authors emphasize that the current neoliberal economic system deprives people of their human rights, fails to deliver social protection and public services to those who need them most, and has devastating effects on the well-being of the planet. The move toward a human rights-based economy is therefore essential for building a new eco-social contract.

2. Pathways for participatory eco-social contracts

Reforming or renegotiating social contracts can take different forms and entail complex transformations of institutions and structures that shape horizontal and vertical relations between citizens and states. Existing social contracts are often renegotiated in times of crisis and at

critical junctures, for example, in post-conflict situations or during periods of decolonization or democratization. There is, however, a risk of backsliding through elite-driven and populist bargains and a backlash against equity and human rights. Various contributions in this volume describe how moments of regime change and active claims-making or collective action by subaltern groups have increased participation in bargaining processes, opening windows for more inclusive and sustainable social contracts.

The issue brief “Towards an Eco-Social Contract in Nepal: The Role of Rights-Based Civil Society Activism,” co-authored by Alina Saba and Gabriele Köhler, focuses on the case of Nepal, where historically marginalized members of society—including women, Dalits and Indigenous peoples—and social movements led by rights-based civil society organizations are keeping governments and policy makers accountable. The authors argue that despite setbacks, dilution and obstacles during implementation, Nepal’s recent political developments with regard to its 2015 Constitution represent the beginning of a new eco-social contract, underpinned by persistent contestation by marginalized communities, identity groups and civil society.

The think piece “A New Eco-Social Contract to Address Historical Injustices Faced by Indigenous Peoples,” co-authored by Isabell Kempf and Rafael Ponte, explores how Indigenous peoples have successfully stewarded their lands over generations but now risk being left behind due to systemic land inequality. The authors argue that successful reclaiming of ownership and governance of land originally held by Indigenous peoples can reduce inequalities and respond to the climate crisis. It discusses positive examples from Australia, South Africa, Greenland and Latin America that bear

lessons on how lands are being reassigned or reappropriated by their original owners who are reclaiming their rights in a new social contract that also works for nature.

The issue brief “Informal Workers and Just Transitions: Toward a New Eco-Social Contract,” by Mauro Pucheta with Lauren Danielowski and Daniela Chávez Mendoza, argues that a transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy must address the needs and concerns of informal workers, especially women, minorities and migrants who have been historically marginalized and excluded from previous social contracts. Informal workers, the majority of the global workforce, tend to be excluded from social bargaining which is mainly practiced in the formal labour market. The brief looks at how the universality and indivisibility of human rights can provide a framework for including all workers equitably in a new eco-social contract for a more just and sustainable post-Covid-19 world.

What kind of diplomacy should be practiced to “leave no one behind” as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for? And how could multilateral diplomacy at the UN be steered to negotiate a new eco-social contract that is desperately needed to rebound and build a sustainable and just world in post-pandemic times? Costas M. Constantinou poses these questions and more in the blog “Remedying Asymmetric Diplomacy at the United Nations: Towards an Eco-Social Contract.” The blog situates these questions in a context of a pluralization of diplomacy in the twenty-first century where various non-state actors—minority groups, Indigenous peoples, peasant movements, non-governmental organizations and human rights activists—currently interact and network with states in different UN and non-UN settings. The author calls for an equitable engagement to minimize inequality at the deliberative



stage, foster civil society participation and realize more symmetrical diplomacy.

3. Implementing eco-social contracts: Challenges and opportunities

When speaking about social contracts we need to distinguish between ideal understandings of a social contract (the norms and values underpinning its vision and objectives which vary according to different world views and ideologies) versus real-world experiences (the actual institutions and policies implemented and their effects). The following contributions showcase the challenges and opportunities that emerge when implementing eco-social contracts or adapting existing social contracts to climate change and new environmental challenges.

Climate change, natural resource degradation and lack of inclusiveness challenge existing social contracts in the Middle East and North Africa. The think piece “Climate Change: Threat of Potential Opportunity for Social Contracts in the MENA Region,” by Annabelle Houdret and Markus Loewe, looks at how environmental factors influence governments’ scope of action to deliver on their duties of protection, provision and participation within current social contracts. Despite the challenges raised, climate change has the potential to be a trigger for more sustainable and inclusive reforms, including new, environmentally sustainable social contracts. According to the authors, the eco-social contract approach facilitates identifying key issues at stake in the transformation of state-society relations under climate change conditions.

The think piece “Putting Food Justice at the Centre of an Eco-Social Contract,” by Kiah Smith, describes how a new eco-social contract can be extended through the principles and practices of food justice. Drawing on findings from the “Fair Food Futures” project, an Australian Research Council-funded study that explores how

Australian civic food networks envision and work toward food justice, the author argues that it is often interconnected social and economic inequalities—around food insecurity, hunger, poverty, gender and health—that underpin the complex sustainability challenges associated with food system transformations. To shift unequal power relations requires addressing rights, resilience, intersectionality and “food as commons” concepts.

The think piece “Putting Women at the Centre of Sustainable Development: Rethinking the Eco-Social Contract,” by ElsaMarie D’Silva, focuses on rights violations against women and girls in India. It highlights innovative solutions using technology to crowdsource data and mobilize communities to prevent violence against women and girls. Urban and rural youth and women use their local datasets to learn about the nature of gender-based violence, engage their communities in dialogue on conscious and unconscious bias and harmful gender norms, and work with institutional service providers like the police, campus administrations in schools and colleges, and civic authorities to find solutions that will prevent and/or address violence. The think piece argues that such bottom-up approaches and new forms of solidarity will be key in developing new eco-social contracts that protect the rights of women and girls.

Proposing new forms of eco-social contracts requires looking at the state of our current ones to identify where previous social contracts have failed and what must be done to make them more effective. The issue brief “Evaluating Existing Transformations: The Case for a Just Energy Transition,” by Carlos Villaseñor, delves into how recent approaches such as just transition and a new eco-social contract could help to achieve a transition to a low-carbon economy—one that considers principles of justice, human rights and democracy.

The author explores the right to energy and critical considerations regarding its scope and implementation, while observing how it could address inequality and asymmetric power relations.

Principles for Change —An UNRISD podcast series

As part of the Institute's 60th anniversary in 2023, UNRISD launched a new podcast series called *Principles for Change* featuring interviews and dialogues with key change makers that explore how a new eco-social contract can break the cycle of inequality and crises to bring about a more just, fair and sustainable future.

Each episode examines one of UNRISD's seven principles for a new eco-social contract through the perspectives of experts, scholars, activists, policy makers and other actors sharing their insights on what transformative change toward inclusive and sustainable development looks like. Their first-hand experiences and original knowledge on the opportunities for and challenges of embarking on a pathway toward eco-social transformation in different contexts provides important lessons and helps us all imagine a way forward together.

Listen to episodes of the *Principles for Change* series on [our podcast platform](#).



PODCAST

Why We Need a New Eco-Social Contract: A Conversation with Paul Ladd

In this episode, UNRISD Director Paul Ladd talks to Francesco Pisano, Director of the Library and Archives at United Nations Geneva, about the Institute's contribution to multilateralism at this 60-year milestone since UNRISD's establishment. The conversation takes a deep dive into the latest flagship report, *Crises of Inequality*, which shows why, in order to break the cycle of multiple, interlocking crises and address inequality, we need a new eco-social contract.

Paul Ladd tells us about how UNRISD's research has, in many instances, been ahead of the curve, leading to positive impact. He explains in depth key themes in the recent UNRISD flagship report and points to ways in which multilateralism must evolve.

→ [Click here to listen](#)



The background is a vibrant, abstract collage. It features several stylized faces: a white face with a black eye and a black mouth on the left; a face with a large black eye and a black mouth on the right; and a face with a white mask and a red mouth at the bottom. The composition is filled with bold colors like teal, yellow, orange, red, and black, along with geometric shapes and patterns such as stripes and fan-like radiating lines.

Visions



HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

PROGRESSIVE FISCAL CONTRACTS

TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES ADDRESSED

GENDER JUSTICE

SOLIDARITY

A New Eco-Social Contract

Vital to Deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Katja Hujo

The twentieth-century social contract—an implicit bargain between economic imperatives of growth and productivity, and social imperatives of redistribution and social protection—has broken down and cannot sustain the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda. The breakdown of the social contract manifests itself in multiple global crises and the deep divisions in our societies. Inequalities in many dimensions have grown, particularly in the last 40 years, and people feel left out and left behind. The failure of our economic model to account for the natural boundaries of our planet has led to environmental destruction and human precarity because of climate change, extreme weather events and health pandemics such as Covid-19.

For the twenty-first century, UNRISD believes, the contract is in need of a fundamental overhaul. First, it must ensure human rights for all—importantly, this means bringing in those not fully benefitting from previous social contracts, such as women, informal workers and migrants. Second, it must ensure larger freedom for all in a fast-changing world, including security and protection as new challenges emerge. Third, it must spur the transformation of economies and societies to halt climate change and environmental destruction.

What do we mean by the old social contract?

The twentieth-century social contract, commonly understood as more equalized relations between capital and labour, underpinned social policy in industrialized welfare states during the golden age of capitalism. Bargaining processes between employers, workers and governments (what the International Labour Organization calls social dialogue) set out to combine productivity-led growth with enhanced well-being of workers and their families. The expansion of social security coverage and access to public services led to greater equality, opportunities and trust of citizens in their governments, with positive impacts on tax compliance and state revenues (Hujó and Bangura 2020). This social contract was part of the post-war multilateral order of peace, security and development, with the United Nations spearheading the fight for human rights, freedom from want and social justice.

The twentieth-century social contracts associated with welfare capitalism proved useful in creating substantive institutionalized social rights for many citizens in the global North, and for some groups in the global South. However, these contracts have not been an “unproblematically progressive force” (Hickey 2011:9), despite the fact that they were grounded in universal values stipulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Charter (1945). Real-world social contracts, reflecting power asymmetries and financial constraints, created insiders and outsiders between formal and informal workers, for example—often due to the greater bargaining power of organized workers, with less powerful unions and non-organized workers remaining excluded (Mesa-Lago 1978). These social contracts also reinforced gender inequalities—between men as breadwinners and women as dependents.

Starting in the late 1970s, the twentieth-century social contracts began unravelling as

a consequence of the neoliberal paradigm shift and hyperglobalization. They were increasingly replaced by new types of contracts that emphasized individuals’ responsibilities for their own well-being and social protection. While state retrenchment was less pronounced in the global North, the developmental social contracts in the global South were hollowed out as a result of debt crises and austerity (Nugent 2010). State-citizen relations and political legitimacy worsened as a result of shrinking fiscal resources, deteriorating public services and the social costs of structural adjustment. Donor bargains bypassed citizens and shifted accountability related to development outcomes from national populations to external actors (Hujó and Bangura 2020). Around the world, persisting poverty and an unprecedented increase in inequalities, job-less growth, conflicts, crime and insecurity, as well as multiple crises including the climate crisis, were manifestations of broken and outdated social contracts less and less able to fulfil their promises.

A common characteristic of most twentieth-century social contracts was their failure to guarantee respect for planetary boundaries, biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources. All too often traditional farmers, fishers or Indigenous communities with livelihoods based on sustainable use of forests, land and water resources were deprived of traditional land rights by big corporations or predatory rulers, or saw their livelihoods based on natural resources destroyed as a result of pollution and commercialized resource exploitation. Now, in the face of the devastating effects of the climate crisis, citizens around the world are questioning their governments’ capacities to provide protection, security and well-being (Willis 2020). Against this backdrop, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set out to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, and promote sustainable development, peaceful, inclusive societies and accountable institutions. It constitutes

Box 1. The origins of the idea

The social contract idea goes back to fundamental questions of political philosophy, reflected among others in Islamic, African and Indigenous communitarian thinking. It is, however, most often associated with European enlightenment philosophy as represented by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, deliberating about political authority, state legitimacy and social order. The moral and political obligations that free individuals accept voluntarily among themselves and vis-à-vis their government in order to escape the state of nature was described as a social contract. An influential contemporary representative is John Rawls, arguing in his *Theory of Justice* (1971) that citizens who, under a “veil of ignorance,” do not know about their position in society agree to basic standards of freedom and equality in order to guarantee a level playing field for all. Scholars distinguish between the social or rights-based variant of social contract theory associated with Rousseau and Rawls, and liberal or interest-based contracts going back to Hobbes and Locke (Hickey 2011), with the former moving beyond concerns of creating social order toward actively promoting social justice.

Box 2. Not one but many social contracts

Beyond the social contract associated with Western welfare capitalism, different types of social contracts can be identified across the non-Western world, for example, in Africa, from communitarian approaches dedicated to the common good such as Ubuntu—"I am because we are"—(Chemhuru 2017), to post-colonial social contracts concerned with nationbuilding, state legitimacy and social cohesion. These social contracts took different shapes, with the more developmental ones being actively dismantled by structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s (Mkandawire 2009; Nugent 2010). Different manifestations of corporatist social contracts or social pacts can be found in countries with important agricultural sectors. These may link producer organizations, politicians and bureaucrats for policy formulation, or bring farmers into rural-based political parties. A result is more universal, tax-financed benefits as seen in the Nordic countries (Sheingate 2008; Palme and Kangas 2005). A social contract of sorts also evolved in some resource-rich countries with mineral rents owned and distributed by the state. Resource bargains in mineral-rich countries are frequently characterized by elite capture and distributional conflicts; this was the focus of civil society contestation during the Arab Spring. However, there are also examples of marginalized groups being brought into social contracts through the broad distribution of the benefits of resource extraction, as in the case of the Indigenous majority population in Bolivia (Paz Arauco 2020), or migrant workers in the republican regimes in the MENA region (Löwe 2014).

a roadmap toward a new ecological and social contract for people and planet, involving governments, citizens, businesses and other relevant stakeholders. In signing on to the 2030 Agenda, governments committed to creating inclusive social contracts which leave no one behind and safeguard nature. How can this promise be realized? How must an eco-social contract for the twenty-first century differ from previous models? What actions must be taken to get us there?

How would a new eco-social contract be different?

The vision of a new eco-social contract differs fundamentally from the twentieth-century social contract in many ways, including the following:

1. Human rights for all

A new eco-social contract must surpass the post-war welfare state settlements by ensuring human rights for all, including those excluded from previous social contracts or relegated to a secondary role, such as women; informal workers; ethnic, racial and religious minorities; migrants; and LGBTQIA+ persons. This requires a human rights-based approach that goes beyond formal employment-dependent social benefits.

2. A progressive fiscal contract

A new eco-social contract must go hand-in-hand with a new fiscal contract that raises sufficient resources for climate action and SDG implementation, and fairly distributes the financing burden.

3. Transforming economies and societies

A new eco-social contract must be based on the common understanding that we need to transform economies and societies to halt climate change and environmental destruction and promote social inclusion and equality.

4. A contract with nature

A new eco-social contract must recognize that humans are part of a global ecosystem. It must protect essential ecological processes, life support systems and the diversity of life forms, and pursue harmony with nature.

5. Addressing historical injustices

A new eco-social contract must be decolonized, informed by Indigenous knowledge, social values and capacities from the global South. It must remedy historical injustices and combat the climate crisis fairly through just transitions.

6. A contract for gender justice

A new eco-social contract must recognize that previous social contracts have been built upon an unequal sexual contract. It must go hand-in-hand with a contract for gender justice in which activities of production and reproduction are equally shared by women and men and different genders, and where sexual orientations and expressions of gender identity are granted equal respect and rights.

7. New forms of solidarity

A new eco-social contract requires new bottom-up approaches to transformative change for development, bringing together social movements and progressive alliances between science, policy makers and activists. It must overcome the mindset of "us against them," fostering instead a spirit of "all united against" global challenges such as climate change, inequalities and social fractures.

A twenty-first-century eco-social contract, in terms of process and outcome, will reflect a reconfiguration of a range of relationships that have become sharply imbalanced—those between state and citizen, between capital and labour, between the global North and the global South, between humans and the

natural environment. It will be based on rebalancing hegemonic gender roles, resetting dominant discourses, and uprooting relations grounded in patriarchy and cultural norms. It will help define rights and obligations, promote greater equality and solidarity, and provide legitimacy, credibility, trust and buy-in for reforms underpinning transformative change. It will serve to reduce inequalities in all their dimensions, help us to recover from Covid-19 in an equitable and transformative way, and improve our resilience for shocks and crises yet to come.

How do we get there?

Building a new eco-social contract is a way to give substance to the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It will be better understood and have more traction if grounded in broad participation, dialogue and consensus building, while containing clear accountability mechanisms. It will need to reflect the realities of people's lives. It will be constructed—and indeed, is already being constructed—incrementally, step by step across sectors and issues, and at different levels, from local to national, regional and global.

A twenty-first-century eco-social contract must be fostered through a raft of changes to policies and institutions so that they are democratic, inclusive and promote gender and environmental justice, coupled with alternative economies and transformative social policies.

How will UNRISD contribute?

UNRISD put forward the idea of an eco-social contract in its flagship report, *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change* (2016). The current period of multiple crises, including the worst pandemic and economic recession in modern history, demands a timely response that catalyses dialogue and action now to begin building forward better toward resilient and sustainable futures.

“

The time has come to replace the broken social contract and to create a new one geared toward greater inclusion and sustainability.”

— UN Secretary-General
António Guterres, 2020

UNRISD will contribute to this endeavour through research and networking activities that support the creation of a new eco-social contract. We call on researchers, practitioners, advocates, activists and policy decision makers to join us in this effort. Together we will work to unpack and redefine the idea of the social contract, making it inclusive and climate-proof, and adapting it to the new challenges of the twenty-first century.

In terms of research, the UNRISD Institutional Strategy 2021-2025 and our next flagship report are setting out to explore the different manifestations of the broken social contract; what the root causes are; what role rising inequalities play, and who and what drives them; and which policies and institutional reforms are needed to overcome inequalities and build greater social and climate justice. The focus goes beyond the policies and institutions for transformative change, to its agents: the values, mindsets, political alliances and social movements it will take to build a new eco-social contract. This wide-ranging inquiry has four entry points:

1. Contestation and bargaining
2. Key relationships
3. Institutions and policies
4. Norms and values

UNRISD aims to mobilize its diverse global networks, including UN partners, in ensuring the success of this initiative. We have created a new partnership with the Green Economy Coalition (GEC)



VIDEO

A New Eco Social Contract: Vital to Deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The twentieth-century social contract has broken down and cannot sustain the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda. For the twenty-first century, UNRISD believes, the contract is in need of a fundamental overhaul.

→ [Click here to watch](#)

Box 3. Call for participants! Research and networking for a new eco-social contract

Join UNRISD and its partners as we work together to unpack and redefine the idea of the social contract, and to craft a new eco-social contract that is inclusive, climate-proof and adapted to the complex challenges of the twenty-first century. Researchers, practitioners, advocates, activists, policy decision makers, civil society, change makers—we welcome you in our processes of co-creation:

- Global network
- Policy and practice dialogues
- Blog series
- Flagship report
- AOB!

that will join up researchers, scholars, practitioners, advocates, activists and policy decision makers in a network to explore the multiple facets of a new eco-social contract. The network will bring together disparate but connected voices calling for a new eco-social contract, to build understanding across its key dimensions—contestation and bargaining, key relationships, institutions and policies, norms and values. It will provide spaces and counterparts for debate, diagnosis and dialogue on these topics—as well as others that are not yet receiving transdisciplinary attention, but which will be crucial for a new eco-social contract, such as intergenerational justice (youth), human rights-based approaches (marginalized groups) and the rights of nature (environment). The network will also aim to be a space for the co-production of knowledge and analysis with Indigenous peoples and minority groups with traditional knowledge that covers not only social dialogue and consensus building, but also the sustainable use and management of natural resources.

Key questions guiding UNRISD research and networking activities

1. What can we learn from different expressions and experiences of real-world social contracts, especially in the global South?
2. What would be the nature of a new ecosocial contract, and what would its main objectives be?
3. How would a new eco-social contract contribute to achieving just, sustainable and resilient societies and economies?
4. How can we create a participatory, bottom-up and inclusive process ushering in a new eco-social contract?
5. How would a new eco-social contract be implemented at different levels, and what accountability measures are needed?

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Going Beyond the Social

Communitarian Imaginaries as Inspirations for Rethinking the Eco-Social Contract

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES ADDRESSED

Manisha Desai

This brief explores three communitarian imaginaries, or world views, as potential inspirations for a new eco-social contract. What are the benefits, but also the potential pitfalls, of applying the principles of *Ubuntu* (southern Africa), *Eco-swaraj* (South Asia) and *Sumak kawsay* (Latin America) to rethinking economic models, life systems and forms of solidarity in order to bring more ecological and social justice to the twenty-first century?

UNRISD's call for a new eco-social contract is based on the recognition of the failures of the twentieth-century social contract, which did not benefit everyone in the global North, and much less so in the global South. It outlines a bold vision of a new eco-social contract for the twenty-first century—based on human rights for all; larger freedoms for all; and transformation of economies and societies to halt climate change and environmental destruction—if the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to be realized.

Yet, as Gabriele Dietrich (1994) noted decades ago in critiquing the notion of expanding the economic pie for more inclusive development in India, the metaphor of the pie itself was problematic in a country where most people could barely afford rotis (flatbreads, a staple in parts of India). The eco-social contract recognizes the importance of going beyond expanding the pie and trickle-down economics and acknowledges the need for participatory processes to enact economic and social transformations through legislations and policies that include a

contract with nature and new forms of solidarity. Still, old metaphors of contract and development, however sustainable and inclusive, remain. So, what might a roti-based rethinking look like?

This brief reviews three communitarian imaginaries from different areas of the globe which could function as potential inspirations for a roti-based, or bottom-up, radical reimagining. Communitarianism is a world view which sees human beings as social and shaped by multiple communities of which they are part. Hence, moral and political judgment, policies and institutions should reflect this understanding. But even within communitarian thinking there are different conceptions. For example, the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE) defines it as follows:

“Communitarianism has to do with the territorial, the political and the cultural, it is a different economic model and life system, it is the principle of life of all the original Nations and Peoples, based on reciprocity, solidarity, complementarity, equity and self-administration. This is why communitarianism constitutes a regime of property and systems of economic and socio-political organization of a collective character that furthers the active participation and the well-being of all members” (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*, CONAIE 2013:29 cited in Altman 2020:753).

Unlike the human-centred approach of the global North, this definition offers a relational world view that goes beyond the social to encompass economic, political and cultural relations based on reciprocity, respect and equity with all living and non-living entities within a territory. Such a capacious understanding of communitarianism is common to the principles of *Ubuntu* (Xhosa for shared humanity), *Eco-swaraj* (Hindi for self-rule) and *Sumak kawsay* (Quechua for living in harmony). In these approaches neither the individual nor the community precede each other but are produced in reciprocal relations.

Yet, communities are not homogenous and marginalized groups, such as women, are often not accorded the same respect and equity as dominant groups, making social justice scholars and activists, and particularly feminists, wary of communitarianism. Other scholars have noted that mobilizing communitarian principles for development purposes can amount to the appropriation or recolonization of knowledges from specific historical and geographical contexts. While these concerns are justified, our current moment calls for careful consideration of these conceptions in respectful dialogue with the communities in which they have animated political struggles for dignity, autonomy and land; reflections which are all the more necessary as integrated world capitalism (Guattari 2001) threatens the survival of all species, including our own.

Ubuntu

In southern and eastern Africa, communitarianism has been associated with concepts such as *Ubuntu*, often defined as humanness or human dignity (LeGrange 2012) and referring to shared humanity and interrelatedness (Waghid 2014).

There are various ways of referring to this concept in different African languages:

“*Ubuntu* in Nguni languages (Xhosa/Zulu/Ndebele), *uMunthu* in Chichewa, *Botho* in Tswana, *Vumunhu* in Changani, *Utu* in Swahili, or *Unbu/Hunbu* in Shona” (Mawere and van Stam 2016:290).

Despite the linguistic differences, there is a shared sense of “togetherness”, as expressed in the Xhosa saying “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye Bantu*,” translated as “an individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others and in relationships individuality is expressed” (LeGrange 2012:61).

Thus, the individual and the community are not autonomous or separate entities at odds with each other, as is often posited in liberal philosophies, but are in relation

with each other and share common goals of togetherness and love for each other (Mawere and van Stam 2016). As Ngcoya (2015) notes, *Ubuntu* begins with the equality of all humans and therefore all those who are considered human are entitled to rights, justice and fairness, not only those who may be members of a particular community. Equally, rights, justice and fairness are not bestowed by a pre-existing state but through becoming a human being via one's relationships with others: "Giving and receiving, (a) reciprocal process of mutual recognition (is) important to the cultivation of selves... Personhood is achieved via one's responsibilities to the self, household, and community" (Ngcoya 2015:254).

Community extends to *mntu* (beings with intelligence) and *hintu* (beings that are inanimate) and includes ancestors and God via the concept of *ukama* (Murove 2009 cited in LeGrange 2012). *Ubuntu* therefore emphasizes the interconnectivity of humans, the environment, ancestors and God (LeGrange 2012). Cultivating *Ubuntu* means maintaining the relationships toward all these entities with respect, hospitality and generosity.

Mobilizing *Ubuntu*?

What happens when Indigenous knowledge is taken up and applied to contemporary contexts? The example of South Africa has some celebratory, but also cautionary, elements.

Ubuntu was mobilized and contested in political struggles in South Africa in the 1970s. The Inkatha National Cultural Liberation Movement formulated *Ubuntu-Botho* for school curricula but most teachers and students resisted it because they were opposed to Inkatha's conservative ideology and interpretation of it. But when Stephen Bantu Bike integrated it into the fight against apartheid it was embraced by many (Ngcoya 2015).

In post-apartheid South Africa, *Ubuntu* has been mobilized by the state, civil society and corporate actors. The state has mandated that it be taught in school as Indigenous knowledge. As McDonald (2010 cited in Ngcoya 2015) notes, it is sometimes even used to express the state's commitment to social justice, even though most of the neoliberal policies in post-apartheid South Africa have not resulted in justice for most people. Similarly, in the corporate sector, marketing materials refer to "*Ubuntu* capitalism and *Ubuntu* consultants", which violates the very spirit of *Ubuntu*. On the other hand, when in 2008 a wave of "Afrophobia" led to violent attacks and killings of migrants and refugees from other southern African countries, organizations like the International Women's Forum drew upon *Ubuntu* and one's responsibilities to others to stop such atrocities and support the migrants (Ngcoya 2015).

As these contemporary examples demonstrate, when *Ubuntu* is mobilized instrumentally and rhetorically but without "cultivating *Ubuntu*", it only exacerbates existing, systemic inequalities. But it also suggests that engaging with these imaginaries is not about going back in time, contrary to what some critics say. Rather, a variety of actors draw upon such imaginaries to call people to action for social justice in the present. There is, then, some reason to remain hopeful about a creative recovery of *Ubuntu* as a social value that can shape social transformation in South Africa (Eliastam 2015).

“

...a relational world view that goes beyond the social to encompass economic, political and cultural relations based on reciprocity, respect and equity with all living and non-living entities within a territory.”

Eco-Swaraj or Radical Ecological Democracy

Eco-swaraj (ecological self-rule or self-reliance), as conceptualized by Kothari (2014), combines the concept of *swaraj* with ecology to create an alternative paradigm for ecological and social justice in the twenty-first century. By upholding the primacy of nature rather than humans, it puts humans in their place within nature, and humans' self-rule is thus linked to that of nature.

In so doing it builds on Mahatma Gandhi's model of development based on *gram swaraj* (village self-rule), India's traditional village governance systems with *gram panchayats* (village councils) as the basis for developing a social contract for local, self-sustaining economies. The *eco-swaraj* conception, however, goes further by putting the self in relation to others and nature. The relational self of *eco-swaraj* is multidimensional, social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual. Together with the community, it is at the centre of local governance and economy. Kothari therefore defines it as radical ecological democracy akin to Shiva's Earth Democracy, "... a new pact with the earth, as members of the earth family, a pact to create a new non-violent economy and Earth Democracy" (Shiva 2016:208).

Eco-swaraj thus begins with ecological sustainability in which humans, as part of nature, ensure its thriving. Given its origin in local struggles for equity and justice, particularly around land, gender and climate change, *eco-swaraj* emphasizes rights and representation for all. It focuses on social well-being and justice that is multidimensional and inclusive of rights for all; direct political and economic democracy in which individuals and communities decide at the local level what ensures their well-being; and cultural and knowledge plurality in which diverse forms of knowledges are valued and in dialogue for the good of self-reliant communities.

"Ecological Swaraj is an evolving worldview, not a blueprint set in stone. In its very process of democratic grassroots evolution, it forms an alternative to top-down ideologies and formulations, even as it takes on board the relevant elements of such ideologies. This is the basis of its transformative potential" (Kothari, Demaria and Acosta 2014:368).

Use and abuse of ancient texts

Other scholars in India, such as Dhiman (2016), have sought inspiration from the spiritual vision of *Vedānta*, the non-dual philosophy in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā Sanskrit texts, to address the current crises. In these texts, all life is understood to be one limitless reality, and one sees oneself in everyone and everyone in oneself. Thus, the well-being or "bliss" of the individual is coterminous with social harmony. As such, relations among humans, and also between humans and non-humans, are defined as "I-We" rather than "I-Thou". Like *Ubuntu*, this feeling of oneness must also be cultivated through praxis. This often focuses on individual actions such as vegetarianism and practice of yoga *asanas* which are inspired by nature. But these individual actions are usually not linked to collective action nor do they focus on socio-economic and political democratic practices. Rather there has been a commodification of such practices, which—again as for *Ubuntu*—violates their very principles.

Even more troubling has been the use of ancient Sanskrit texts by nationalist governments to construct Hindu nations. Not only the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā, but also ancient Sanskrit concepts like *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the whole world is one family), *jivanmukti* (embodied liberation), and *brahmisthiti* (state of being established in brahman) have been mobilized in this way, in gross violation of the spirit of these conceptions. As a result, grassroots movements which

do not associate themselves with ethno-nationalism tend to focus on local struggles rather than Sanskrit texts for their inspirations.

Sumak Kawsay

While *Sumak kawsay* (living in harmony or life in plenty as translated by CONAIE) or *Alli kawsay* (living well) have been part of Indigenous imaginaries for centuries, they have been mobilized as political concepts for local, decolonial struggles rather than ecological ones more recently.

In Ecuador, *Sumak kawsay* originated in the Amazonian province of Pastaza, while *Alli kawsay* became dominant in the highland areas. These concepts also appear in earlier Indigenous movements of the 1930s and 1970s in Ecuador (Altmann 2020).

Each formulation is linked to specific territories and comprise three interconnected principles.

1. *Sumak allpa* (land without evil), the basic principle that links human beings and nature through use of territory in equilibrium, which can only be achieved via decentralization;
2. *Sumak kawsay* (clear and harmonious life), which regulates egalitarian, reciprocal and communitarian principles;
3. *Sacha kawsai rikisina*, or how to “understand-comprehend-know-convince oneself-be sure-see” (Silva 2003:86 cited in Altmann 2017:796). This is a place-based concept that links a community to its land. Consequently, “there cannot be life in harmony without a land in harmony as its material and spiritual basis” (Altmann 2020:90).

Sumak kawsay, while place based, is a dynamic conception open to interaction with other ideas and visions—and expressed using different terms in different places—so long as the relational and

harmonious core values are maintained, as the quote below suggests.

“We have been in constant movement, allowing us and the other forms of life to continue their circle. *Musbuk allpa*, the land in permanent renovation, has been the fundamental premise of *Sumak kawsay*. . . . This living together and harmony taught us to understand the multiple dimensions that compose the *Sumak allpa*” (Sarayaku 2003:3-4 cited in Altman 2017:755).

There are similar conceptions among non-Amazonian Quechua communities such as *omepo warenemente kiwina amopa* in Wao Tereo, and *pneler nunka* meaning “good land” in Shuar Chicham (Altman 2017: 796). And it was through the Indigenous movements of the 1990s and after 2000 that *Sumak kawsay* began to circulate regionally and globally.

Reductionist appropriation

While *Sumak kawsay* was mobilized as part of Indigenous communities’ struggles for autonomy and power, when the constituent assemblies of Bolivia (2006-2009) and Ecuador (2007-2008) incorporated it into their new constitutions, it began to travel elsewhere as part of the discourse on alternatives to development. Given *Sumak kawsay*’s focus on living in harmony with land and the other species living there, it became easily reduced to the ecological and lost its link with the Indigenous communities’ struggles for decolonization and autonomy. Indigenous communities both welcome the attention to their cosmologies and knowledges but are also disheartened by its reduction to only an ecological concept. As critics (such as Benalcázar and de la Rosa 2021) note, it has been appropriated as a de-territorialized and universal vision of a good life, and re-named “*buen vivir*”. It has been removed from the specificities of local struggles, the very basis of their existence, and has morphed into a technocratic concept.

“

All three imaginaries are eco-centric as opposed to anthropocentric, in the way that they uphold the primacy of nature rather than humans.”

What Rolling Out a Roti-Based Rethinking Entails

The appropriations and misappropriations of the imaginaries outlined above remind us of our ethical responsibility as we reflect on how place-based, communitarian conceptions can inform global projects such as a new eco-social contract. With due caution and respect, there are lessons that can be drawn from these different ways of being in relation with human and non-human entities.

All three imaginaries are eco-centric as opposed to anthropocentric, in the way that they uphold the primacy of nature rather than humans. They are also based on a relational ontology, which means that relations with the self, others—both inside and outside the community—and non-humans are based on reciprocity, generosity, respect and equity. The relational ontology also requires the cultivation of the self and of socio-economic and political organizations that ensure equity and justice for all. The eco-social contract shares this focus on developing new institutions based on

equity and justice. Given our current integrated world capitalism dominated by the imaginaries and organizations of the global North, local communitarian imaginaries might seem utopian. Yet, they gesture to several issues for consideration.

First, if we are to take the relational world view seriously, then it needs to be reflected in our language and metaphors. For example, the term “eco-social” connects two spheres that were seen as distinct. In so doing, it moves in the direction of *Ubuntu*, *Ecosvaraj* and *Sumak kamsay* which do not have an anthropocentric world view in which humans and their socio-cultural and political organizations are seen as separate from non-human entities.

Second, all three raise the conundrum of scale. The local is the terrain where these world views originate and are actualized in dialogue with the community. Yet, the local, as Massey (1994) reminds us, is never just local but always constituted by extralocal social relations. Nonetheless, the local and global logics cannot be put together without thinking through the ways in which articulations among them might be possible. This is particularly important as communication technologies give us a false sense about the possibilities of communications across local communities. But these technologies are not available equitably nor are local communities homogenous.

Finally, all three specifically entail a fundamental rethinking of the self as relational, in which a person’s relations extend to human and non-human entities alike. Such a rethinking would be critical in restructuring our socioeconomic and political organizations to be equitable, fair and just to all humans and other living and non-living entities.

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VIDEO

Rethinking the Eco-Social Contract

This webinar brings together experts and activists to discuss the thinking behind eco-social contracts past and present from different parts of the globe. The webinar also throws light on how a twenty-first-century eco-social contract can be fostered through a raft of changes to policies and institutions so that they are democratic, inclusive and promote gender and environmental justice, coupled with alternative economies and transformative social policies.

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TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

Dismantling the Ecological Divide

Toward a New Eco-Social Contract

Najma Mohamed
Patrick Huntjens

Without nature our economies cannot function, and our societies cannot survive. The shift from an ego-centric to an eco-centric social contract requires a fundamental reassessment of the purpose, goal and vision of our societies and economies, and what this means for the relationship between people, between people and power, and between people and nature. This brief considers the critical pathways needed to build a world where all life flourishes and identifies possible avenues to break from the dominant social paradigm fuelling the ecological divide, one of the greatest fault lines of our time.

In 1972 world leaders embarked on an ambitious agenda at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden to make nature a major issue in multilateral cooperation. Fifty years later, the environmental movement converged to take stock of progress. Buried in the recommendations emerging from Stockholm+50 is a call to repair and restore humanity's relationship with nature.

Yet our economies remain blind to humanity's dependence on nature. Instead of investing in the protection, restoration and maintenance of nature, we are bankrolling its destruction to the tune of USD 1.8 trillion every year (Koplow and Steenblik 2022). Our economies are driving the accumulation of wealth for the few (Wilkinson and Pickett 2022) while the rest of us pick up the social and environmental costs of overextraction,

pollution and exploitation. Tackling the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises will require making peace with the planet (UNEP 2021) and fundamentally transforming humanity's relationship with nature.

To address the divide between humans and nature, we must recognize the values, beliefs and principles driving this disconnect. Environmental philosophers have put forward diverse theories on the causal factors for the human–nature divide. The anthropocentrism at the root of prevailing paradigms of economic thought is among the primary causes of one of the greatest societal fault lines of our time: the ecological divide (Scharmer 2013; Scull 2017). The ecological divide is essentially the disconnection between the self and nature, where humanity recognizes neither its dependence upon nor connectedness with the natural world.

The schism between humans and nature and the dominant anthropocentric worldview arises from three beliefs that have been in ascendance since the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Huntjens 2021). First, humans came to see themselves as superior to nature. Second, blind belief in the liberal market economy and infinite growth shaped economic design and planning. Third, in this dominant market economy paradigm, people were regarded primarily as consumers, leading to societies premised on individualism and self-interest, materialism and short-term thinking.

Within this anthropocentric worldview, nature is viewed largely in relation to its benefit and utility to humanity. In theory, economists recognize environmental damage as negative externalities that must be addressed. In practice, economies are still largely blind to humanity's dependence upon and reciprocal relationship with nature. Consequently, no one wants to pay for the climate and environmental catastrophe created by economic models

that incentivize overconsumption, destroy nature and degrade communal bonds.

This brief explores how to put nature at the heart of a new eco-social contract. It examines the shifts that are needed to move humanity from an ego to an eco-centric vision. It considers the critical pathways needed to build a world where all life flourishes and identifies avenues to break from the dominant social paradigm fuelling the ecological divide.

Breaking with the old social contract

“Nature has had little or no intrinsic value for most (but not all)” modern social contract theorists (O'Brien et al. 2009). As a result, existing social contracts are largely anthropocentric and reproduce or reinforce the ecological divide. While social contract theorists do not usually actively set out to exclude nature, it is an omission rooted in the dominant social paradigm of anthropocentrism.

Existing social contracts reflect the dualism of the dominant social paradigm steeped in anthropocentric visions of the human–nature relationship, such as the human mastery, control and exploitation of nature. Oftentimes, these contracts are largely human rights-based or based on human interest and seek to maintain social order, protect rights and promote social justice (Huntjens 2021) with limited or no recognition of the rights of nature. Modern social contracts have been largely (and for some, necessarily) human centred. This human-centredness is deeply ingrained in the market-based policies and institutions that govern our economies and in the underlying paradigm of Western liberal political thought that centres the individual.

However, demand for a different kind of world, one that is more sustainable, resilient and fair, is increasing. Communities, workers and social groups are

seeking to bridge the ecological divide by using a new language that takes into account personal and communal well-being, planetary health and the rights of nature. People are imagining a world where relationships, not between people and power but between humans and nature, are reimagined through the lens of a new, just and inspiring eco-social contract.

This reimagining requires a reconfiguration of not only the overarching goal of a social contract, but also a fundamental restructuring of how humanity views itself and its relationship with nature. A break between the old and new social contract is urgently needed to address the anthropocentric foundation of our current economies and societies driving the ecological divide (Bogert et al. 2022). The shift from an ego-centric to an eco-centric social contract requires a fundamental reassessment of the purpose, goal and vision of our societies and economies, and what this means for the relationship between people, between people and power, and between people and nature.

Where are the seeds of this new eco-social contract? They are found in new economic visions redefining the purpose and form of our economies and societies and expressed in the beliefs, values and practices of communitarian and other marginalized knowledges and approaches that recognize and reflect the reciprocity between humans

and nature (Desai 2022). They exist in governance systems and institutions alert to the fact that “humankind is one component of a system of life” and that we need a new eco-social contract “where life is sacred, and all are in service of securing its future” (Cullinan 2014). A new eco-social contract exists in the expressed calls for the legal recognition of the rights of nature and for a world where all life prospers.

Reimagining a new eco-social contract

If a new eco-social contract is to signify a shift from anthropocentric values, principles and beliefs to eco-centric pathways of connection and relatedness they must embrace principles that situate humanity within the broader community of life. This includes respect and care for all life including the more-than-human world, solidarity and togetherness with all life, collective well-being and reciprocity, planetary health and the protection of nature’s rights (Huntjens 2021). Ecological economics, the rights of nature and eco-social relationality represent emerging approaches seeking to establish the eco-centric foundations needed to breach the ecological divide.

Economies in the service of all life

Nature is increasingly becoming a central part of new economic visions, paradigms and pathways. Without nature our economies cannot function, and our societies cannot survive. We need economies that support prosperity within the ecological limits of the planet and allows nature—oceans, soils, rivers, forests, plants, animals—and people to thrive together. New (and old) economic visions are only now beginning to integrate nature into economic models and frameworks, from well-being to post-growth economics. These models and frameworks question the purpose of economic organization and the measurement of economic progress and offer policy proposals to transform

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Without nature our economies cannot function, and our societies cannot survive.”

Figure 1. From an old to a new eco-social contract

Overarching goal	From the protection (for example, of property rights) and maintenance of social order and individual freedom	→	To well-being, social and environmental justice, and planetary health
Worldview	From anthropocentric visions of life where people work to earn money and consume	→	To eco-centric visions where people are part of an interdependent ecosystem and work for prosperity within planetary limits
Vision of human behaviour	From <i>Homo Economicus</i> , a rational person pursuing wealth and self-interest	→	To <i>Homo Ecologicus</i> , a person connected with and caring for the well-being of all life on Earth
Basis for social relations	From a utilitarian vision of the social and human–environment relationship	→	To mutual respect, solidarity, togetherness and environmental stewardship
Vision of society	From an individualistic view of society	→	To a view where humans are one part of a social–ecological system
View of nature	From a position where nature is used and exploited exclusively by humans to serve the needs of humanity	→	To seeing the Earth holistically where humans are a subservient (but impactful) part of the planetary ecosystem

Adapted from Huntjens and Kemp 2022.

our economies and societies in the service of all life.

New economic thinking adopts a broad and critical view of neoclassical and neoliberal economics, both describing the shortcomings of orthodox economic theory and highlighting the “severe consequences of its systemic discounting of the environment” (Boehnert 2018). Indigenous, environmental, post-growth, well-being, sufficiency, regenerative and eco-feminist economics, to name a few, all incorporate one fundamental premise: the economic system is not separate from, but rather embedded within and dependent upon, nature.

While new economics tackle the narrative around growth and environmental limits and propose widespread economic justice, social well-being and ecological regeneration, most still privilege human well-being. While they align with many of

the characteristics of eco-social contracts (see figure 1), they often still reflect an anthropocentric view of the superior position of humans in relation to the natural world.

Alternatively, Indigenous economics, being implemented through a range of place-based systems such as biocultural heritage, bioregions and territories of life, offer economic models that can help bridge the ecological divide. They do not privilege human economic goals but instead seek to achieve the well-being of both people and the planet together while promoting “sufficiency rather than infinite growth, and equity and redistribution of wealth rather than accumulation” (Swiderska 2021). Recognition and greater adoption of such eco-centric economic visions, including Indigenous or regenerative economics, would help address one of the primary failings of mainstream Western economics: anthropocentrism.

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Reformulating the human–nature relationship around reciprocity, partnership and connectedness lays the foundation for a new eco-social contract where people and nature thrive together.”

Recognizing and upholding the rights of nature

In July 2022, the United Nations adopted a resolution on the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental human right. At present, over 150 nations have already included some form of this right in their constitutions. A handful of nations are even advancing ecological constitutions where not only the human right to a healthy environment exists, but the rights of nature and ecosystems to exist, flourish and naturally evolve are being enshrined into law.

In 2008, Ecuador was the first country to include the rights of nature within its constitution. This vision is built on the country’s Indigenous peoples’ vision of well-being, *sumak kawsay*, where nature exists not as an object, but rather as a rights holder. Articles 71–74 of Ecuador’s constitution recognize the rights of nature to respect; the maintenance and regeneration of its functions and processes; its restoration; the limitation or prevention of activities that, for example, might lead to species extinction or negative effects on ecosystems or natural cycles; and the right for people to benefit from the environment (Republic of Ecuador 2008). Ecuador’s courts have upheld this

constitutional right on a few occasions, most recently in 2021 when its highest court ruled that plans to mine for copper and gold in a protected cloud forest was unconstitutional and violated the rights of nature (Greenfield 2021). The court extended this right to the entire country, a landmark victory for understanding nature protection beyond formally protected areas.

A duty of care for nature, largely in the form of “do no significant harm” legislation, exists in the environmental policy and regulatory systems of most countries. While ecological constitutions may be viewed as the gold standard in its recognition of the rights of nature at the highest level, these rights will only be meaningful if those in breach of these rights are held accountable. While Ecuador, Bolivia and Uganda are currently leading constitutional reforms that recognize the rights of nature, scores of lawsuits have successfully defended the rights of nature or ecosystems by granting nature legal personhood. For example, the rights of rivers have been championed in New Zealand, India and Bangladesh (Westerman 2019). While the adoption of legal personhood is rooted in eco-centric traditions and wisdoms, environmental defenders are using anthropocentric mechanisms and institutions, constitutions and courts to defend nature’s rights. This differs from the ways in which the rights of nature are expressed in many traditions, cultures, beliefs and practices, such as the protection of sacred places.

The rights of nature movement “recognises and honours that nature has rights, that ecosystems—including trees, oceans, animals, mountains—have rights just as human beings have rights and that all life, all ecosystems on our planet are deeply intertwined” (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature 2022). The movement has led to legal and governance reforms where nature, rather than being viewed as property under the

law, is being recognized as having a legal right to exist, thrive and regenerate. This movement— while a central component of any new eco-social contract—still reflects an anthropomorphic, if not an anthropocentric, worldview. How can humanity connect with nature in reciprocity and in partnership as an equal participant in life?

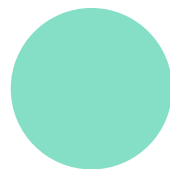
Building eco-social relationality

A new eco-social contract requires a shift from anthropocentric to eco-centric visions of life where people are one part of an ecosystem; from human-centred individualism to humans as part of a social–ecological system; and from using, exploiting and managing nature to serving the needs of the Earth as a whole. Anthropocentrism seeks to reduce “nature to a function of humanity” while eco-centrism reduces humanity to nature (Scott 2003). However, humans are also a part of nature and in partnership with nature. Nature has its own status, not under humans but rather beside humanity, the two working together in a dynamic process of interaction and mutual development. Humans are also participants in nature, not just biologically, but with a sense of belonging, connectedness and relationality (de Groote and van den Born 2007).

An eco-social contract “embraces the reality that humans are an integral part of the whole living community...and that, in order to flourish, we must govern ourselves in ways that accord with the laws of that community” (Cullinan 2014) within planetary boundaries while being cognizant and respectful of the rights of nature. Reformulating the human–nature relationship around reciprocity, partnership and connectedness lays the foundation for a new eco-social contract where people and nature thrive together. Anthropological and sociological literature has traced the intimate relationships between humans and animals in India (Dave 2014; Govindrajan 2018), arguing that human–nature dialogues generate “microcosms of nature-

culture” (Baviskar 2011). Elsewhere, land and nature as relational agents are shown to help Indigenous communities connect with ancestral experiences, one’s own body as well as dreams and spirituality (Datta 2015). Morally, Bendik-Keymer (2020) argues that understanding land as a relational agent can also help humans achieve emotional and relational maturity while working through community disagreements and acknowledging legitimate histories of hurt, distrust and trauma. This eco-social relationality challenges anthropomorphism and requires humanity to learn to relate to nature rather than imagining nature as a mirror image with human characteristics.

If a new social contract is to take an eco-social turn, it must bridge the ecological divide and create the conditions necessary for all life to flourish. However, humans are an impactful part of the planetary ecosystem, altering planetary systems and placing all life in peril. Oftentimes due to our environmental footprint and level of consciousness, humans have a larger responsibility than other living beings to act for the planet. We live in a world imagined and shaped by human minds and hands. Can we reimagine a world where we act in equal partnership with nature, hearing the cries of the Earth and becoming the voice that speaks for nature? Can we craft a new eco-social contract premised on a new understanding of the human– nature relationship?



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If a new social contract is to take an eco-social turn, it must bridge the ecological divide and create the conditions necessary for all life to flourish.”

Reimagining a eco-social world

Environmental degradation is advancing around the world with scientists warning that we are headed toward a major planetary catastrophe. This has spurred the recognition that we must fundamentally alter the relationship between humankind and nature while “securing the highest legal protection and the highest societal value for nature” (Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund 2022) in our visions of a new social contract. In *Le Contrat naturel*, French author and philosopher Michel Serres presents readers with the challenge to “look outside the narrow frame of the social contract to what, to our peril, it excludes: nature” (Watkin 2020).

Renegotiating an eco-social contract requires engagement with the diverse values and visions of the human–nature relationship, including the beliefs, narratives and cultures that shape our economies and societies. Processes of social contract formation at multiple levels, while context-specific, are characterized by path and goal dependencies as well as worldviews. The values and visions behind these worldviews, as well as the technological and institutional innovations for an eco-social world, matter equally.



We can no longer ignore the voices from economics, ethics, cultures, politics, religion, law and science urging humankind to change course.”

Five areas needing further exploration to deepen the human–nature relationship and guide the formulation of a new eco-social contract are:

- 1. How do we decentre the individual as the political agent and central focus of social, economic and political thinking? What does it mean for humans to represent nature in economic and governance systems without instrumentalizing nature?**
Engaging with the life-affirming principles of environmental imaginaries and knowledges, old and new, that build a relational understanding between people and nature can help ‘represent’ nature authentically in new eco-social contract formulations, as seen in ecological constitutions.
- 2. What can economic models that pursue human well-being in ways that contribute to the health and integrity of the Earth look like?**
New economic models that measure what matters: health, prosperity, dignity, happiness and the well-being of all life, already exist. How can we expand and champion Earth-centred economics so we design economies in the service of all life?
- 3. How do we embrace the principles of the rights of nature movement to shift away from nature-as-object and commodity to nature-as-subject and community?** The application of rights of nature visions, in bioregionalism, biocultural heritage or territories of life, show how rights of nature can be applied in practice and in places. The budding nature-positive movement should be underscored by this deeper and more meaningful understanding of human dependence and connection with nature.

4. How do we mobilize social demand and build a movement to advance the rights of nature and to make this a central part of a new eco-social contract?

Civic mobilization around the ecological emergency, such as people's assemblies for nature, are connecting and motivating people to think about and act for nature.

5. What does an eco-centric approach mean for global social contract formulations such as the UN Charter of Human Rights, the Earth Charter and the Paris Agreement? Inter-governmental agreements and processes help set the tone and mobilize national and regional action on the nature and climate crises. These must be used more effectively to build an eco-social world where nature matters.

We have the knowledge, wisdom and understanding needed to reframe our relationship with nature. For decades, scientists have been reporting on the rapid decline of the health of nature and the impact this will have on the planet, now and in the future. Traditions and wisdoms across the world have long called for, and are alerting the world to, the impact humans are having on nature. We can no longer ignore the voices from economics, ethics, cultures, politics, religion, law and science urging humankind to change course. These voices are getting louder and are converging making a convincing case that without flourishing nature, we will not survive.

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PODCAST • DISPONIBLE EN ESPAÑOL

«Un contrato con la naturaleza», el Pacto Ecosocial del Sur con Breno Bringel

Breno Bringel es miembro cofundador del Pacto Ecosocial e Intercultural del Sur, una red de activistas, intelectuales, académicos y organizaciones sociales de América Latina que busca disputar los sentidos de las transiciones energéticas y ecosociales y de los llamados «pactos verdes» de nuestro tiempo. En este episodio, Breno nos cuenta cómo, desde una mirada crítica, el Pacto quiere aportar a la construcción de alternativas holísticas que integren ejes de transformación económica, ecológica, democrática y cultural para transiciones verdaderamente justas, guiadas por principios de ética interespecie y ecodependencia, que superen el paradigma del antropocentrismo y que se alejen de modelos de crecimiento económico indefinido así como de una lógica extractivista y colonial.

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Joining Up the Dots Between Social and Climate Justice

Time for a New Eco-Social Contract

Katja Hujo
Isabell Kempf

This think piece introduces the UNRISD series, The Time is Now! Why We Need a New Eco-Social Contract for a Just and Green World, and argues that our social contracts are broken and cannot sustain the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Rather than fixing what was never a truly inclusive, ecological or equitable social contract, we argue that now is the time for a fundamental rethink of the principles and values that guide our societies and economies. This will require a process of meaningful participation, deliberation and negotiation in different places, at different levels and with all stakeholders, to commit to new eco-social contracts which are fully inclusive, grounded in human rights, respect planetary boundaries and support new forms of solidarity.

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

PROGRESSIVE FISCAL CONTRACTS

TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES ADDRESSED

GENDER JUSTICE

SOLIDARITY

A world in crisis signals broken social contracts

In a world of serial and simultaneous crises where countless certainties are shattered, many people are beginning to question the principles and values our societies are founded upon, what philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau have called the social contract. A social contract can be defined as the explicit and implicit agreements between states and citizens that define the rights and obligations underlying legitimacy, security, rule of law, citizenship and social justice. Theoretical approaches to, and real-world examples of, social contracts may differ according to the weight they give to social order versus social justice issues. And indeed, current debates take an even wider scope: diving deep into the racialist and gendered nature of existing social contracts; our broken relation with nature; governments' failure to protect their populations or denial of basic democratic and human rights; migrants falling between the cracks; informal workers without fundamental labour rights, social protection or just wages.

These debates, and the ways current social contracts are failing, manifest themselves in mounting challenges and clearly demonstrate three important reasons why we need a new eco-social contract.

First, recent crises threaten to reverse previous progress on poverty reduction, equality and SDG implementation. The ongoing Covid-19 health pandemic, in particular, is still wreaking devastating socioeconomic havoc across the globe.

Second, our global socioeconomic model has failed to produce sustainable development, has undermined biodiversity and resulted in an urgent climate crisis, with the world heading for a steep temperature rise in excess of 3°C this century—far beyond the Paris Agreement goals of limiting global warming to below 2°C while pursuing 1.5°C.

Third, we are seeing increasing social tensions, protests and conflicts, undermining state legitimacy and eroding democracy, as a result of rising inequalities, persistent patterns of social exclusion, unequal power relations and governance failures—including the lack of political will to address urgent challenges.

Indeed, a number of actors, from Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, to the UN Secretary General, the International Trade Union Congress and the World Economic Forum, have recently spoken of the need for a new social contract, articulating their ideas and claims on how state-citizen relations, capital-labour relations, gender relations and human-nature relations need to change to address the huge challenges that humanity must confront head on if we are to survive.

A global blueprint already exists: In signing on to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, governments in the global North and South committed to creating inclusive social contracts that leave no one behind and safeguard nature. This amounts to a global social and ecological compact. Despite its accountability and follow-up mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda remains a voluntary commitment that needs to be translated into national eco-social contracts whereby political leaders can be held fully accountable for the delivery of their obligations and promises, and all citizens and societal groups can contribute to defining and achieving common goals.

To turn the 2030 Agenda into reality, UNRISD (in its 2016 flagship report, *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change*) has advocated for an eco-social turn and innovative eco-social policies to catalyse the necessary change in ideas, policies and practices at all levels. Because we now also need to shape a more fair and just post-pandemic world, we want to reinvigorate these proposals and take the debate to the next level. To do so we are joining forces

with academics, practitioners and activists to create a [Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract](#). This blog series is one of many activities and outputs that the network will deliver over the coming years. [UNRISD's 2022 flagship report](#) will be an additional pillar of our engagement with this debate.

A diversity of social contracts exists...

What do social contracts look like? They rarely bear that name and may not always be easy to identify, because they are often worked into the heart of governance structures, which themselves differ greatly. It is then perhaps not surprising that there is a wide diversity of social contracts, emerging from different contexts. How were these social contracts created, and by whom? How did they adapt (or not) to changing circumstances? Did they deliver on their promises?

For example, more equalized capital-labour relations and shared growth were at the heart of twentieth-century social contracts in [industrialized welfare states](#) and some [late-industrializing countries in the global South](#). The promise of this bargain was delivered through an increase in the social wage for workers (employers' or state's social contributions) and a substantial expansion of social policies and publicly funded social services. During this period, which is often called the [golden age of capitalism](#), all involved parties seemed to benefit: organized workers and their families, a thriving business sector, and an expanding public sector financed through growth-driven fiscal receipts.

Beyond the social contract associated with Western welfare capitalism, other kinds of social contracts and associated narratives, or normative frameworks, can be found across the world. In Africa, examples range from communitarian approaches dedicated to the common good such as [Ubuntu](#)—"I am because we are"—to post-

colonial social contracts concerned with nation-building, state legitimacy and social cohesion. Social contracts in the [Middle Eastern and North African \(MENA\) region](#) have been labelled populist-authoritarian, grounding their legitimacy on security and service provision rather than participation.

Social contracts were often shaped by the dominant economic and political power structures: Western post-war social contracts, for example, were negotiated between governments, trade unions and employer's associations, reflecting centralized corporatist industrial relations. In countries with important agricultural sectors, [agrarian social pacts](#) were forged, linking producer organizations, politicians and bureaucrats for policy formulation and coordination, or incorporating farmers into rural-based political parties. These bargains often resulted in more universal and tax-financed benefits as seen in the [Nordic countries](#). Social contracts in mineral-rich countries were frequently characterized by elite capture and distributional conflicts as the cases of Chile, the Democratic Republic of Congo or [Zimbabwe](#) show, leading some scholars to argue that resource-rich countries are afflicted by a [resource curse](#). However, there are also [examples of governments](#) which have included marginalized groups into social contracts in resource-dependent countries by widely distributing the benefits of resource extraction. In [Bolivia](#), for example, the social contract was renegotiated during the government of Indigenous President Evo Morales in the early 2000s. The process created a new shared narrative around the concept of *buen vivir*, a communitarian vision with Indigenous roots on how to live in harmony with others and with nature, which was incorporated as a foundational narrative in the [Bolivian constitution of 2009](#).

...and are unravelling

Many twentieth-century social contracts forged in the post-war/post-colonial era began unravelling during the period of neoliberal policies and accelerated globalization starting in the 1980s. They were increasingly replaced by new types of contracts that emphasized individual responsibilities for well-being through market mechanisms to the detriment of communal values, redistribution and public provision. Social contracts in the global South were undermined by debt crises and austerity policies. State-citizen relations and political legitimacy worsened as a result of shrinking fiscal resources, deteriorating public services and the social costs of structural adjustment. Donor bargains bypassed citizens and shifted governments' accountability to deliver on their social contract from national electorates to external actors, while policy space shrunk as a consequence of loan conditionality.

Our missing contract with nature

A common characteristic of most twentieth-century social contracts was their failure to recognize planetary boundaries, protect biodiversity and ensure the sustainable use of natural resources. The consumption and production patterns associated with these contracts were not viable for the long term, and have resulted in the depletion of natural resources, pollution and environmental degradation. Indeed, while humanity has prospered, admittedly unevenly, it has come at a devastating cost to nature: Estimates show that between 1992 and 2014, produced capital per person doubled, and human capital per person increased by about 13 percent globally; but the stock of natural capital per person declined by nearly 40 percent. There was simply no binding obligation for economic actors, or the state, to protect the environment.

At the same time, the right to extract resources, deposit waste and emissions, and use eco-system services for profit-making, was taken for granted. Under this model, those who practiced more environmentally friendly ways of living were quickly pushed to the sides. All too often traditional farmers, fishers or Indigenous communities with livelihoods based on sustainable use of forests, land and water resources were deprived of land and resource rights by big corporations or predatory rulers, or saw their livelihoods based on natural resources destroyed as a result of pollution and commercialized resource exploitation. Now, in the face of the devastating effects of the climate crisis, citizens around the world are calling upon governments to spearhead the transition toward sustainability, demanding a new eco-social contract.

The time is now! A new eco-social contract for a just and green world

Where do we go from here? In a recent issue brief, UNRISD suggests a number of principles that could guide our future deliberations around a new eco-social contract.

1. Human rights-based social protection for all

beyond employment-related social benefits. This will include those excluded from previous social contracts.

2. A contract with nature

because human life exists on a finite planet, and economic activities and societies cannot be delinked from Earth's ecosystems.

3. Transform economies and societies

to halt and reverse environmental destruction and climate change and promote social inclusion and equality.

4. Address historical injustices

by promoting just transitions, decolonized and Indigenous knowledge, and social values and capacities from the global South.

5. Gender justice

so that activities of production and reproduction are equally shared by women and men and different genders, and sexual orientations and expressions of gender identity are granted equal respect and rights.

6. New forms of solidarity

bringing together progressive alliances between science, policy makers and social activists; and replacing the old mindset of “us against them” with a new “spirit of unity.”

7. A progressive fiscal contract

that raises sufficient resources for climate action and SDG implementation and does so in a fair way.



PODCAST · AVAILABLE IN GERMAN

SDG 10 (UN): Bekämpfung von Ungleichheit – ein sehr umstrittenes Ziel

Wie wurde das SDG10 in den Katalog der Agenda 2030 aufgenommen? Was beinhaltet das Ziel? Warum ist Ungleichheit wichtig für nachhaltige Entwicklung? Und was gibt es für Lösungsansätze?

Isabell Kempf, Leiterin des Forschungsinstituts der UN für soziale Entwicklung in Bonn (UNRISD) und Katja Hujo, Senior Forschungskordinatorin bei UNRISD in Genf und Hauptautorin des UNRISD Flagship-Berichts zu Ungleichheit beantworten diese Fragen.

Neue Erkenntnis:
Wirtschaftliche Ungleichheit ist negativ für Wachstum und für Armutsbekämpfung. Im Gegensatz zur früheren Wirtschaftstheorie, die davon ausging, dass Ungleichheiten sogar Wachstum und Investitionen ankurbeln.

→ [Hier anhören](#)



HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

How a Rights-Based Economy Can Help us Overcome the Social, Economic and Environmental Challenges of Our Time

Ohene Ampofo-Anti
Alina Saba

The multiple crises triggered by climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, unjust economic systems and the conflict in Ukraine have reignited discussions on transforming the current economic system into one that works for both people and the planet. It is evident that the current neoliberal economic system deprives people of their human rights, fails to deliver social protection and public services to those who need them most, and is having a devastating effect on the well-being of the planet. The move toward a human rights-based economy is essential for building a new eco-social contract.

The world is facing several intersecting crises: A global public health crisis because of Covid-19; an escalating climate catastrophe; a socioeconomic crisis as evidenced by growing wealth and income inequality; and most recently, a peace and security crisis due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the human impacts of failed austerity measures in many countries and spiraling sovereign debt are intensifying, as illustrated by the [current crisis in Sri Lanka](#).

These crises expose fundamental flaws in following the status quo at local, regional and global levels. Now, more than ever, it is evident that the grand schemes of the neoliberal economy such as deregulation, [public private partnerships](#) (PPP), austerity and labour flexibilization have been abject failures. The Covid-19 pandemic and rising food prices are predicted to push almost [263 million people into poverty](#) and the debt repayments of the poorest countries will total a staggering [USD 43 billion](#) next year. Meanwhile, [billionaire wealth has skyrocketed](#).

As a result, ever widening circles of people are experiencing the urgency of establishing a new social contract rooted in respect for the well-being of humanity and the planet. We propose that one possible path toward a renewed social contract is a [Rights-Based Economy](#) (RBE). This is an economy designed to guarantee the material, social and environmental conditions necessary for all people to live with dignity on a flourishing planet.

What do human rights bring to the discussion?

RBE departs from the long-held premise that the purpose of the economy should be to extract, consume and accumulate more wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Instead, RBE creates enabling conditions for both humans and the planet to flourish alongside each other. [RBE consists of five key pillars](#):

1. **Guaranteeing dignity and well-being for all, at all stages of life**

Ensuring that every person has access to the goods and services necessary to thrive, such as housing, healthcare, food and water.

2. **Pursuing substantive equality while dismantling intersecting inequalities and systems of oppression**

Addressing historical legacies of oppression and the drivers of structural inequality to create greater equity in opportunities and outcomes.

3. **Tackling power imbalances in the economy**

Fundamentally shifting power from corporations to communities and rewriting the rules that have made the playing field so uneven and created massive obstacles to social mobility.

4. **Working in harmony with nature, not exploiting it**

Pursuing a developmental pathway which values the intrinsic worth of nature and nurtures respect for the Earth's natural systems, learning from Indigenous knowledge and practices.

5. **Democratizing and decolonizing the global economy**

Radically transforming institutions and systems of global economic governance to overturn asymmetries between the global North and the global South in accessing and controlling resources.

What distinguishes RBE from other alternative economic models is that it draws upon—and is shaped by—the standards and principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other treaties. These international declarations and treaties enshrine widely agreed upon values such as dignity, equity and justice. They also set out binding obligations that governments and other powerful actors must comply with to

give effect to these values. Understood holistically, they set out a redistributive agenda that has the potential to be transformative.

To recognize public goods such as health, water and education as rights acknowledges that they are a prerequisite for human dignity. Consequently, access to them cannot be left to the whims of the market or to the arbitrary choices of government actors. Governments must take concrete steps to guarantee these goods using the maximum available resources. This entails the equitable generation, allocation and expenditure of fiscal resources. Increasingly, human rights actors are clarifying how these standards should be implemented. For example, the Center for Economic and Social Rights recently published the Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy, offering guidance for how to create a new fiscal contract that is human-rights centered.

This human rights framework also includes extraterritorial obligations, which require states to cooperate internationally and refrain from actions that could threaten the rights of those living outside of their territory. Drawing on these standards and principles, RBE could overhaul the neocolonial global economic system, especially pertaining to tax and debt, and replace it with a system that transforms power imbalances between the global North and South. The global economy is interconnected through transnational companies, financial policies and trade deals in ways that reproduce historical racial oppression rooted in the legacies of colonialism, slavery and apartheid despite their formal abolition. A recent groundbreaking statement issued by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination demonstrates how these dynamics have also fueled vaccine inequity. Decolonizing the global economy is crucial for creating an equitable, just, safe and healthy planet for all.

These are just some of the ways RBE could facilitate a new social contract by demanding accountability from governments to catalyse greater action for the redistribution of resources and power, enabling human dignity and planetary flourishing.

How RBE intersects with other alternative economic models

RBE seeks to complement other progressive alternative models. For example, it learns from and aligns with many aspects of *buen vivir*, stressing the need to work in harmony with nature instead of exploiting it, recognizing the intrinsic worth of the environment and aiming to decolonize and democratize the economy, both locally and globally.

RBE also aligns with many feminist demands, including calls to rebuild the social organization of care and dismantle all forms of patriarchal domination in the economy, from ensuring substantive gender equality to establishing gender-responsive, universal and comprehensive social protection schemes which are radically redistributive in nature. As former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has stated, “a human rights-based economy is inevitably a feminist economy.”

Lastly, RBE embraces key premises of degrowth, namely that GDP is not a proxy for well-being and that there is not a causal relationship between commodity production and social outcomes.

A call for action, solidarity and mobilization

RBE and the calls to craft a new eco-social contract both point to the urgency of transforming the current economic system. UN leaders have repeatedly reiterated the urgency of this task, with the Secretary-General calling for a new social contract

rooted in human rights and the need for an overhaul of the global financial system.

The task ahead of us now is to build momentum and power, and to replace the neoliberal economic narrative of market efficiency with new narratives and visions of our own. To move ahead, we must simultaneously break down silos and bridge the social movements working on issues of human rights, climate change, gender equality, tax justice and social justice. It is only through our solidarity and mobilization that we can establish a Rights-Based Economy toward a social contract that can meet the social, economic and environmental challenges of our time.



PODCAST

Human Rights for All and Historical Injustices Addressed, with Imraan Valodia

Economist, activist and UNRISD Board member Imraan Valodia joins UNRISD Senior Research Coordinator Isabell Kempf to unpack South Africa's political vision for addressing historical injustices after apartheid. Focusing on the post-apartheid constitution, which guarantees comprehensive human and socioeconomic rights, they explore the need for and impact of measures aimed at historical redress and redistribution in the face of the country's extreme inequalities and how, despite remarkable progress, these have fallen short in some respects. Imraan highlights the importance of political systems in enabling or limiting the possibilities of constitutional change such as that South Africa experienced, pointing out that this bears important lessons for social contract processes in other parts of the world.

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Participatory Processes



HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

PROGRESSIVE FISCAL CONTRACTS

TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES ADDRESSED

GENDER JUSTICE

Towards an Eco-Social Contract in Nepal

The Role of Rights-Based Civil Society Activism

Alina Saba
Gabriele Köhler

The new eco-social contract for the twenty-first century must prioritize securing human rights for all and spur the transformation of economies and societies to collectively halt climate change and environmental destruction. In Nepal, historically marginalized members of society—including women, Dalits and Indigenous peoples—and social movements led by rights-based civil society organizations are keeping governments and policy makers accountable. They are paving the way for transformative change founded on economic and social justice and ending centuries of discrimination and exclusion.

Introduction

This thematic brief examines the history of some of Nepal's major policy changes since the country's emergence from a civil conflict in 2006 and looks at the prospect of introducing an eco-social contract as an inclusive strategy to achieving lasting economic, social, political and ecological justice.

Nepal has a long history of social assistance programmes driven by poverty, exclusion and the fight for ecological justice influenced by the climate and environmental vulnerability of the Himalayan region. This was exacerbated by nominal commitments by political elites to establish an inclusive Constitution post-2006 and perseverant contestation

by civil society. The signing of the 2015 Constitution was considered a breakthrough because not only did it formally commit to recognizing social justice and inclusion, but it also ended legal discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, region, religion, gender and indigeneity. At this time, the political system was also secularized, side-lining Hindu ideology.

However, discrimination and oppression continue to undermine the rights promised in the new Constitution. Cleavages are worsened and perennially reinforced by economic inequities and power hierarchies. Communities who do not meet the expectations of the “High Hindu” dominant nationality often experience marginalization, oppression, economic and societal exclusion, and denial of ecological rights. This is particularly true for the country’s Dalit and Indigenous communities.

This brief tracks the trajectory of establishing a notional eco-social contract in Nepal within the new 2015 Constitution while considering its various deliberations and drafting processes. To do this, we analyse current progressive rights-based alliances and organizations leading the environmental justice movement that are challenging exclusionary politics. These alliances and organizations are reviewed with respect to their genesis and composition, political commitments and advocacy and mobilization strategies. The brief concludes with an outlook on the prospect for an inclusive, progressive and rights-based eco-social contract in Nepal.

In terms of methodology, this thematic brief builds upon the active engagements of one of the authors, discussions with experts and activists, including the UNRISD working group on eco-social contracts, as well as academic and political literature.

A post-conflict reformation of the Nepal government

In April 2006, the People’s Movement (*Jana Andolan*), a cross-sectional coalition of civil society groups and individuals, organized 19 days of non-violent protests in the Kathmandu area, demanding democracy and the monarch’s abdication. After 10 years of violent civil strife, these protests catalysed the introduction of a new political system. Nepal was proclaimed a secular republic, thus abolishing the monarchy deeply rooted in Hinduism. The Hindu caste system had been legally abolished in 1963, but its exclusionary practices had continued.

The new government publicly acknowledged that social exclusion had been one of the root causes of the conflict (Khatiwada and Köhler 2014). The civil and political movements that overthrew the century-old Hindu Kingdom did not merely target a regime change, but also sought structural changes that moved the country away from a unitary, Kathmandu-centric system to a decentralized system prioritizing political cohesion and social inclusion. The first section of this brief examines the socioeconomic, political, gender and ecological reforms introduced by successive post-conflict governments in the lead-up to the passing of the 2015 Constitution.

Socioeconomic policy reforms

Building on a considerable history of social policy action in Nepal itself—which can be traced back to the 1990s—and regional influence from neighbouring countries, the post-conflict governments introduced a series of socioeconomic policies to promote social inclusion and address income poverty. These came in the form of free access to basic health services for disadvantaged children, single women, pensioners and people living with a disability, employment generating

schemes and tax concessions with positive discrimination elements.¹ Although the reforms were adopted with relative ease throughout the country, most of them were underfunded and thus generated only modest economic benefits for individuals or households, and should be expanded and deepened.

Political reforms

Political governance reforms were far more contentious. The Constitution drafting process (2007–2015) was rife with violent conflicts and debates, mainly over the topic of restructuring the state from a unitary form of governance to a federation of the country's provinces with some degree of autonomy at the provincial and local levels. After a series of violent protests led by Madhesi communities,² Nepal was declared a federal state in the Interim Constitution in 2007. Additionally, Article 21 in the Interim Constitution introduced social justice as a legal concept for the first time, ensuring inclusion on the principle of proportional representation for marginalized groups such as Dalits, women, Indigenous nationalities, Madhesi communities, poor farmers and labourers in state structures.³

The demand for transforming Nepal into a federal state arose from the movements led by Indigenous peoples and Madhesi communities to build an inclusive New Nepal (*Naya Nepal*). They wanted to create opportunities for those who had long been excluded from state structures and to address the High Hindu caste domination (Hachhethu 2014). Article 138.1 in the Interim Constitution enshrined federalism as a progressive restructuring of the state in public discourse, seeking to end discrimination based on class, caste, gender, religion, language, culture and region by eliminating the centralized and unitary form of the state.

For marginalized groups, identity was a central pillar of their advocacy, and the Interim Constitution was an opportunity to

redress historically exclusionary processes. However, traditional political parties, certain media outlets, the bureaucracy, the judiciary and civil society criticized their advocacy of inclusion as being an “external agenda weakening of Nepali sovereignty and as nationally divisive” (Thapa and Ramsbotham 2017:7).

An intelligible shift occurred during the 2013 election when the second Constituent Assembly Election saw the re-emergence of Hindu ideology.

On February 20, 2017, Mohan Mainali reported in South Asia Check that the right-wing National Democratic Party Nepal won 25 percent of proportional representation votes in Kathmandu. Ideas of ultra-nationalism and populist rhetoric of prosperity returned to dominate the Nepali political sphere, claiming that identity was disruptive to national unity (Lama 2020:16). After the election, Nepali society became highly polarized on the inclusion of marginalized groups and the ways caste, class and religion-based discrimination influence political discourses.

Against this background, Nepal's new Constitution was promulgated in September 2015. On September 20, 2015, news website Al Jazeera reported that national celebrations in Kathmandu contrasted starkly with violent protests in the Terai, where 40 people were killed in the week leading up to its adoption. One of the more regressive provisions of the Constitution was the new classification of the *Khas Arya*, a collective reference to some High Hindu castes, as a marginalized group with a right to social inclusion measures (Hachhethu 2017:59). The introduction of *Khas Arya* as a new category for inclusion undermined the state's previous commitment to address historical discrimination based on caste, class and religion. It also diluted the concept of inclusion by failing to recognize the historical and present economic,

¹ Khatiwada and Köhler 2014:136ff; Köhler 2021; Shakya 2021.

² Madhesi communities broadly refers to the people of non-hill origin residing in the southern belt of Nepal who are distinct ecologically, linguistically and culturally from those residing in the middle hills. According to the 2011 census, they account for 19 percent of the total population of Nepal. Madhesi communities are a heterogeneous group of people with their own social hierarchies of high Hindu Madhesis, Dalits, Muslims and Indigenous Madhesis. They are a regionally excluded group often classified as second-class citizens as they have historically been left out of Nepal's hegemonic and monolithic nation building processes.

³ Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007.

social and political discrimination faced by Dalits, Muslims, Madhesi communities and Nepal's Indigenous peoples (Jha 2017:66).

Even though not all political aspirations of the marginalized were recognized and institutionalized in the 2015 Constitution, Nepal nevertheless achieved several key milestones in the social inclusion policy arena, including passing Article 38.4 on the rights of women, Article 40.1 on the rights of Dalits and Article 42.1 on the right to social justice. Additionally, Article 258 established a National Inclusion Commission, Articles 260ff created the Commissions of Women, Dalit, Indigenous nationalities, Tharu, Madhesi and Muslim communities, and Articles 84.2(8), 86.2(a)(b) and 176.6(9) helped introduce a proportional electoral system in federal and provincial parliaments.

Gender reforms

The 2015 Constitution also instigated improved political representation of marginalized groups such as women, Dalits and Indigenous peoples by introducing quotas in the electoral system and establishing a three-tiered government system: federal, provincial and local government bodies. In the 2017 federal and provincial elections, the Election Commission mandated a 40.4 percent reservation for women, a first in the country. At the local level, at least two of the four ward members needed to be women, one of whom from the Dalit caste. The 2017 local elections saw a significant rise in the number of women, and specifically Dalit women, elected to leadership positions overall.

However, elected candidates for the highest public office roles such as mayors (for urban municipalities) and chairpersons (for rural municipalities) remained majority male: Out of 753 chairpersons and mayors elected, only 18—or 2.39 percent—were women. It was deputy and secondary leadership roles that were primarily filled

by women. In the 2022 local elections, 25 women were elected as mayors or chairpersons, an increase that propounds the improved leadership capacities of women political leaders building upon their earlier roles as deputies.

According to Krishna Gyawali writing for Online-Khabar on 2 June 2022, aggregated election results show that the total number of women representatives elected decreased from 779 in 2017 to 656 in 2022, with a significant decline occurring in deputy positions from 700 to 562. This decrease in women's representation has been attributed by The Record, an independent digital publication based in Kathmandu, to political party dynamics and the increased vulnerability of women candidacies in an unstable political context. Moreover, in light of the pressures on women's time and resources during the Covid-19 pandemic and nation-wide lockdowns, women may have chosen to retreat from their political engagements and activities. This trend shows that inclusive policies are difficult to implement even when explicitly mandated in law.

Gender discrimination continues, favouring male candidates over women in decision-making spaces, and the diversity of elected Nepali women remains scant where most elected women in the highest decision-making roles are filled by *Khas Arya* women instead of Indigenous, Madhesi, Muslim and Dalit women. Moreover, the representation of Dalit women in these spaces became possible only because of the government's explicit mandate while the representation of other marginalized women continues to remain nominal. In fact, Indigenous women are now seeking formal recognition of "Indigenous woman" as a distinct category within the 2015 Constitution, not to be conflated with women in general which, they argue, dilutes the multiple intersecting forms of discrimination that Indigenous women face in Nepal (CEDAW 2018).

Ecological reforms

Similar to the socioeconomic, political and gender reforms introduced by the successive post-conflict Nepali governments leading up to the signing of the 2015 Constitution, ecological reforms also have a long history in the country.

At the national level, Nepal has been a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) since the 1990s. Moreover, at the applied level, the community forestry movement was also launched in Nepal in the 1990s. Community forestry has contributed to building rural-social cohesion by providing physical and social infrastructure in its various forms including natural, social, human, financial and physical capital. Since inception, the programme has mobilized 1.6 million households who collectively manage 16 percent of the total forest area of Nepal (Pokharel 2020). Community forestry is important for climate-vulnerable countries since it is a key method for implementing and scaling-up climate mitigation projects, including REDD+, in line with the UNFCCC Paris Climate Agreement and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

“

Community forestry is important for climate-vulnerable countries since it is a key method for implementing and scaling-up climate mitigation projects.”

The 2015 Constitution, too, reflects growing ecological concerns. Article 30 recognizes citizens’ right to a clean and healthy environment and compensation for any injury caused by environmental pollution or degradation. In a section

delineating policies relating to the protection, promotion and use of natural resources, Article 51(g)(1) makes explicit reference to renewable energy and guarantees the equitable distribution of the fruits of natural resources, offering preferential rights to local Indigenous communities. Considering the interconnection between Indigenous rights and ecological concerns, it is notable that in 2007, soon after the end of the civil conflict, Nepal adopted the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO Convention 169)—the only South Asian country to have ratified this key convention, which however, still needs to be claimed and realized.

The 2020 Voluntary National Review of Nepal details efforts on the UN’s SDG 15 regarding terrestrial ecosystems, forests, land degradation and biodiversity loss. Reported progress on the pertaining indicators is steady (Government of Nepal 2022:52ff). Indeed, community forestry is hailed as Nepal’s success story, despite its limitations. Even though community forestry is rooted in Indigenous practices of forest and resource management, its formalization and institutionalization processes have tended to overlook customary Indigenous practices and knowledge. Some Indigenous activists, therefore, criticize community forestry particularly because it excludes local Indigenous communities from decision-making and equitable resource sharing (NEFIN 2016).

To build a strong eco-social contract, climate action projects—including community forestry programmes—must follow free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) principles as enshrined in ILO Convention 169 and in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), of which Nepal is a signatory nation. In practice, this means recognizing the collective and traditional ownership of the land customarily claimed by Nepal’s Indigenous peoples, protecting

and promoting tangible and intangible knowledge and heritages related to nature, and providing adequate information and access to decision-making spaces related to resources and benefit sharing (NEFIN 2020).

The role of rights-based movements for co-creating an eco-social contract

Despite setbacks, dilution and obstacles during implementation, Nepal's recent political developments with regards to its 2015 Constitution is the beginning of a new eco-social contract (Sunam and Shrestha 2019). We argue that this is primarily due to the persistent contestation—some peaceful, some violent—of marginalized communities, identity groups and civil society.

In the post-conflict period, social protests were (and are) multi-pronged. In the initial phase after 2007, Nepal abolished its monarchical system and became a secular republic. It is one of the first countries globally to recognize LGBTQI rights. Despite some regressions compared to the ambitious Interim Constitution of 2007, many elements of a more liberal social turn have remained.

Civil society groups continue to seize political opportunities to advocate for the rights of marginalized communities. Alongside political party contributions, rights-based organizations and civil society have been instrumental in establishing inclusive policies in Nepal. The social justice movements led by Dalits, the political movements led by Madhesi communities and the ecological and political movements led by the country's Indigenous peoples continue to inform policy making and to challenge the country's elites.

For example, in 2020, a nationwide independent #DalitRightsMovement began in Nepal to protest the killing of a

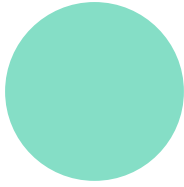
Dalit teenage boy, Navaraj BK, and five of his friends by a mob of villagers over an intercaste marriage. The social movement that grew out of this gruesome human rights violation continues to advocate against the impunity, prosecution and killings of Dalits across the country. The movement has garnered widespread support and Dalit rights organizations continue to fight for an end to all forms of discrimination and violence based on caste system.

The National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) and the National Indigenous Women's Forum (NIWF-Forum) are two national-level Indigenous women's rights organizations advocating for the social, cultural, political and economic rights of Indigenous women and the application of intersectional feminism in women's movements throughout the country. In 2018, a consortium of Indigenous women's organizations, including NIWF and NIWF-Forum, submitted a shadow report calling on the state to recognize Indigenous women and Indigenous women with disabilities as a distinct legal entity (CEDAW 2018). Following the report submission, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) made 15 recommendations to the government of Nepal asking that the Constitution be amended to better align with UNDRIP. CEDAW's recognition of the Indigenous women's movement in Nepal and their demands is considered a historic success in the international human rights arena.

However, the pace of the Indigenous movement's successes in Nepal has slowed in the last few years (Chhantyal and Rai 2020:6). This may be due to increased weariness and pessimism, heightened polarization between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, as well as some degree of co-optation by political parties. For example, marginalized groups' demand for an inclusive society via identity-based

Box 1. The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN)

The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), an umbrella organization made up of representatives from 59 of Nepal's Indigenous nationalities, has been collectively advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples since the early 1990s. It played a key role during the Peoples Movement of 2006 and during the Constitution's drafting process from 2007–2015. It helped institutionalize the rights of Indigenous nationalities and ensured that the Nepal government ratified international treaties such as UNDRIP and ILO Convention 169.



“

Rights-based organizations and civil society have been instrumental in establishing inclusive policies in Nepal.”

federalism during the drafting of the Constitution was often portrayed as a threat to social harmony and national unity (Saba 2018).

Nevertheless, the movement is re-emerging in other forms across the country. Recently, Indigenous peoples have fought against neoliberal development projects being aggressively implemented by federal, provincial and local governments in collaboration with multilateral development banks working in the hydropower sector to build more electricity transmissions lines and road expansions (Bhattachan 2019:369). On 4 May 2021, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) similarly reported that the Indigenous peoples of Nepal won a rare victory against the European Bank-funded high voltage transmission line project for violating their FPIC rights.

Outlook: Civil society's role in inclusive and citizen-led nation building

Globally, and in South Asia especially, authoritarian, patriarchal and classist governments and police actions have in recent years succeeded in oppressing marginalized communities in general and their civil society representatives in particular. The Covid-19 pandemic greatly affected Nepal where the government responded to the crisis with draconian measures, further exacerbating societal cleavages.

We recommend the following policy changes to facilitate the implementation of an eco-social contract that is inclusive and propels lasting socioeconomic, political, gender and ecological justice in Nepal:

- At the government level, regulatory reform must be deepened and strengthened. Legislation must ensure genuine intersectionality in affirmative action legislation and its implementation to realize and consolidate social inclusion. Politically, tokenism should be tackled.
- A new eco-social contract built on social inclusion requires more progressive fiscal policy for two intertwined reasons: (i) to support generous eco-social policy expenditures and the provision of public goods; and (ii) to enforce much-needed income and wealth redistribution (Chakravarty 2021; Bonnerjee 2014).
- Labour laws must be reformed to address gaping gender, caste and ethnicity-driven employment and wage gaps. Access to decent work must rectify the enormous cleavages between work in the formal economy and work undertaken as a self-employed or day labourer in the informal economy. Even though Nepal has ratified most of the fundamental ILO labour conventions, it still has not ratified the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87).
- The land rights of women, farmers and Indigenous communities should be secured and all work-related processes, including care work, the informal economy and the formal economy, for example, businesses and government offices, should recognize environmental rights and climate impacts (Saba 2018).
- At the interpersonal level, marginalized communities' identity



must be valorised. Progressive intersectionality would help bring the causes of these marginalized groups into the fore without conflating each community's struggle. This requires education and employment policies addressing marginalized communities and their locations in particular, as well as public messaging to radically influence public opinion and sentiment; the interpersonal level, too, is crucial for the process of co-creating a new eco-social contract.

- Norms and ideals should be transformed. Marginalized and excluded communities and individuals demand recognition, respect and representation, and there must be access to reparation and reclamation. This approach is different from patronage and charity; it is an inherently human rights-based approach to inclusion and could usher in new cross-thematic coalitions of Nepal's different identity groups (Köhler and Namala 2020:340). It is a pre-condition for any eco-social contract that is co-created.

In conclusion, the two-way interface of public activism and contestation is key to co-creating a new and progressive eco-social contract in Nepal. Affirmative action codices, social transfers or legislation and directives on their own do not always result in genuine inclusion unless backed and reinforced by consistent civil society pressure (Piketty 2020).

As one legal expert from the South Asian region has put it: "Legislative changes come off the back of movements" (Nundy 2021). Social movements, as well as proactive governments and progressive legislation, are needed for transformative eco-social policy.



Progressive intersectionality would help bring the causes of marginalized groups into the fore without conflating each community's struggle."

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VIDEO

Towards a New Eco-Social Contract: The Case of Nepal and Chile

In Nepal, historically marginalized members of society—including women, Dalits, and Indigenous peoples—and social movements led by rights-based civil society organizations are keeping governments and policy makers accountable. The adoption of the 2015 Constitution set several key milestones in the social inclusion policy arena.

In Chile, a three-year-long process to replace the constitution from the military-rule era resulted in the rejection (by 61.86 percent of voters) of a new and progressive constitution through a referendum. However, the experience has provided Chile with new alternatives and paradigms. Public support for a new constitutional reform has also remained.

This webinar examines these two experiences. The speakers consider whether and how they gesture to a twenty-first-century eco-social contract—one that protects and upholds the well-being of both people and the planet.

→ [Click here to watch](#)

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Informal Workers and Just Transitions

Toward a New Eco-Social Contract

Mauro Pucheta
with Lauren Danielowski
and Daniela Chávez Mendoza

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES ADDRESSED

GENDER JUSTICE

A transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy must address the needs and concerns of informal workers, especially women, minorities and migrants who have been historically marginalized and excluded from previous social contracts. This issue brief looks at how the universality and indivisibility of human rights can provide a framework for including all workers equitably in a new eco-social contract for a more just and sustainable post-Covid-19 world.

The current economic model of neoliberal globalization, which is associated with rising inequalities and unsustainable extraction of natural resources, has led to environmental destruction and human precarity (Kempf and Hujo 2022:171). Globally, social contracts are shaped by power asymmetries and have resulted in the exclusion of key actors and the widening of inequalities between insiders and outsiders of social protection systems along the lines of formal and informal work (Plagerson et al. 2022:1).

Informal workers make up the largest share of the global workforce, however, they often remain invisible. Approximately 61 percent of the world's employed population—roughly two billion people—work in the informal economy (ILO 2023a). The majority of informal workers live in the global South: 55 percent of women in the world are informally employed and the share of women in informal employment exceeds that of men in 56 percent of countries, especially in low- and lower-middle-income countries (ILO 2023b). The expansion of the global informal labour sector and the historical and contemporary injustices associated with it requires us to recognize informal workers as key actors of new eco-social contracts (Hammer and Ness 2021).

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A transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy must address the needs and concerns of those who have been historically marginalized and excluded from previous social contracts.”

This seems even more necessary in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic that has further revealed that in existing social contracts informal workers tend to be ignored, stigmatized or considered unskilled and thus less valuable.

Against this backdrop, several actors claim that our social contract has broken down and that we need a new eco-social contract for social, economic and environmental justice (Kempf and Hujo 2022). A transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy must address the needs and concerns of those who have been historically marginalized and excluded from previous social contracts through a human rights-based approach (UNRISD 2022:278). We also need a transition to a net-zero economy—or at least a low-carbon world—to solve the urgent climate crisis. An ambitious just transition is essential in the design of new eco-social contracts since it can bring together environmental and social policies and can “provide the basis for transformative and equitable low-carbon transitions” (Krause et al. 2022:378).

New eco-social contracts and the need for a human rights-based approach

Labour regulations implicit in existing social contracts are largely based on a global North approach to industrial relations, which assume that workers are formally employed (Ashiagbor 2019). This has led to one of the biggest misconceptions about informal work, which is its abnormality, even though the majority of the global workforce is informally employed. As a result, labour market regulations have consistently failed to protect informal workers through the denial of basic human rights such as fundamental labour rights, job stability, workplace health and safety, social protection and just wages (Ghosh 2021; Plagerson et al. 2022).

New eco-social contracts need to address the challenges informal workers face by fostering inclusion and the protection of human rights for all. To safeguard informal workers' rights when transitioning to a low-carbon or net-zero economy, their voices must be heard, and current international and domestic legal systems need to be revisited. Governments should adopt a human rights-based approach to informal work, moving beyond the idea of a formal employment contract and focus instead on the employer-employee relationship as a gateway to the enjoyment of labour rights (Plagerson et al. 2022:1-2).

When it comes to achieving a just transition, the universality and indivisibility of human rights (Whelan 2010) provide useful normative principles for including all workers in new eco-social contracts. A just transition that is guided by the universality of human rights ensures that no one is left behind. The indivisibility of rights enables us to address the compound vulnerability of informal workers and the challenges that they face, including those stemming from climate change, low wages and lack of representation.

Workers' rights cannot be enjoyed without the fulfilment and protection of environmental, social and political rights. The interdependence of human rights becomes even more present in the

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Social protection programmes must be viewed as a long-term commitment to addressing poverty and inequality.”

wake of global crises like Covid-19 and the climate crisis. A human rights-based approach would ensure that employment, workers' rights and decent work are at the epicentre of just transition strategies while economies shift toward sustainable production. Regional courts can play a positive role in this regard and inform national just transition strategies, as shown by the 2017 *Lagos del Campo* judgement of the Inter-American Court of Justice, which has recognized the direct justiciability of social, labour and environmental rights (IACHR 2017).

Informal workers' voices: The challenge of their representation

New eco-social contracts should include informal workers in policy making and social dialogue processes to ensure that their voices are heard. This requires a considerable reform of existing legal and institutional frameworks. Unlike formal workers, most informal workers constitute a heterogeneous group and do not have statutory collective bargaining rights. Traditional social dialogue mechanisms tend to exclude workers outside of formal employment relationships, either *de jure* or *de facto* (Alfers and Moussié 2022:107-108). Legal systems would need to ensure that informal workers' representatives, which are often members of disadvantaged groups such as people living in poverty, Indigenous people, migrants, women or young workers, are part of social dialogue mechanisms. At the international level, informal workers' organizations have successfully contributed to the development of the ILO Homeworkers Convention (No. 177), Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) and the ILO Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation (No. 204) (Alfers and Moussié 2022:110-111). However, there is still a long way to go to consistently address the concerns of informal workers in labour market and

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It is imperative that a just transition to a green economy considers the ways in which gendered divisions of labour shape and are shaped by the climate crisis.”

social protection strategies and policies, and to include them in decision making that affects them.

Certain countries have developed a more systematic approach where informal workers are represented through unions or civil society organizations, such as Argentina, Brazil, Mozambique and South Africa (Alfers and Moussié 2022). In Mozambique, the National Union of Farm Workers acts as a negotiating partner with the government, addressing the concerns and demands of rural workers who are outside the formal labour system but part of global value chains, with the objective of influencing agricultural policies (Schmidt et al. 2023). Similarly, the Indian movement of home-based workers has advocated for recognition by society and by key decision-making institutions (Banerjee 2022).

By building on these and other models of representation, societies can ensure that the voices and rights of informal workers are better recognized and integrated into policy-making processes, fostering true inclusivity in new eco-social contracts. However, most countries continue to lack organizational structures or channels to achieve this objective. In this regard, the role of the state is crucial for ensuring the

equal participation of all constituencies that may be affected by the transition to a net-zero or low-carbon economy.

Formalization and a just transition

Just transition strategies and policies should go beyond procedural dimensions and ensure the protection of informal workers' rights. A just transition can constitute an exceptional opportunity to foster the transition of workers from the informal sector to the formal one, as expressed in principles 19(e), 21(h) and 27(c) of the 2015 ILO Guidelines for a Just Transition (ILO 2015). For example, the recent Argentina Green Jobs Programme (Government of Argentina 2023) adopted in February 2023, which aims to ensure the creation of sustainable jobs and the implementation of a just transition that protects both the environment and workers, constitutes an interesting example as it particularly addresses informal work. Article 2(6) aims to foster measures to transition workers from the informal to the formal sector, particularly in a country where the informality rate amounts to roughly 35 to 40 percent of the workforce. Furthermore, Article 2(8) adopts an intersectional approach with special protections for vulnerable workers (Gobierno de Argentina 2023). The programme emphasizes the importance of reskilling and upskilling, as well as the implementation of measures to protect workers who may be adversely impacted by this transition.

Ensuring the right to social security and protection for every worker, as recognized in principle 20(g) of the 2015 ILO Guidelines for a Just Transition (ILO 2015), be it formal or informal, is another crucial aspect of a successful just transition. As in many regions, in Latin America and the Caribbean, pre-pandemic social security systems were poorly

designed to protect informal workers against a systemic health crisis. Despite this, most countries succeeded—at least partially—to implement measures that increased social protection for informal workers as new transfer programmes were put in place. These measures guaranteed a social protection floor for the population of working age, at least temporarily, expanding benefit coverage to include unemployment and loss of income due to the pandemic.

Since informal workers have consistently been excluded from many employment-based social protection schemes, the post-Covid-19 world could be an opportunity to renegotiate this social contract. Social protection programmes must be viewed as a long-term commitment to addressing poverty and inequality and creating sustainable pathways out of poverty, rather than simply a short-term safety net (Devenish and Afshar 2022). Continuing social welfare policies that were created during the pandemic can be a way to universalize the right to social protection.

A contract for gender justice

Globally, women are more likely to work in precarious jobs in the informal economy such as domestic work and in other forms of home-based care work: over 80 percent of the world's domestic workers are women (IMF 2021; OECD 2019). Women not only face lower wages and higher levels of informality and discrimination, but also structural barriers that prevent them from fully integrating into the economy. For example, in many countries in both the global North and South, women shoulder the responsibility of caring for their families and having to leave paid work to perform unremunerated care work (OECD 2019). A new eco-social contract must acknowledge the unequal distribution of care work and recognize that previous social contracts have been built upon an

unequal sexual contract (Pateman 1988). It must go hand-in-hand with a contract for gender justice where activities of (re) production are equitably shared by women and men (Esquivel and Kaufmann 2017; Kempf and Hujo 2022:183). It must reject the gendered division of labour and emphasize the importance of care work and reproductive labour. Additionally, it is imperative that a just transition to a green economy considers the ways in which gendered divisions of labour shape and are shaped by the climate crisis, particularly in labour sectors such as agriculture, tourism and hospitality (Koning and Smith 2021).

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The current climate crisis urges us to rethink the existing economic model and the social contract on which it is built.”

Conclusion

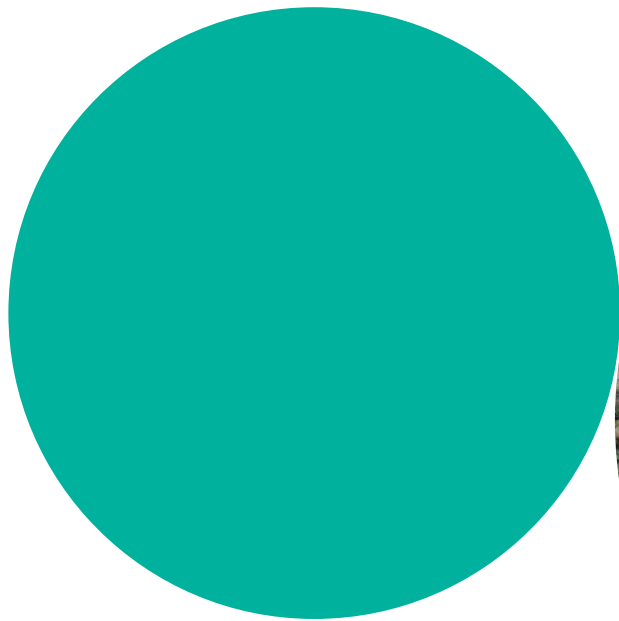
The current climate crisis urges us to rethink the existing economic model and the social contract on which it is built. A transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy must address the needs of those who have been historically excluded from previous social contracts, particularly those who are most vulnerable to economic precarity and socioeconomic marginalization.

The world is at a post-Covid-19 juncture and has a unique opportunity to build new eco-social contracts embracing a human rights-based approach where people are placed at the centre. Informal

workers have a key role to play in the transition to a green economy where (i) social dialogue mechanisms ensure the participation of informal workers' organizations; (ii) employers guarantee every worker's rights; and (iii) laws and policies adopt an intersectional feminist approach to dismantle gender-based barriers to decent work and guarantee economic rights protections.

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A New Eco-Social Contract To Address Historical Injustices Faced By Indigenous Peoples

Isabell Kempf
Rafael Ponte

Indigenous Peoples have successfully stewarded their lands over generations and now risk being left behind due to systematic land inequality. This blog explores cases where reclaiming ownership and governance of land originally held by Indigenous Peoples is helping reduce inequalities and respond to the climate crisis.

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES ADDRESSED

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) account for approximately 476.6 million people or an estimated 6.2 percent of the global population. They have long faced historical injustices through processes such as colonization, nationalization and privatization, leading to their present-day inequality and disproportionate poverty. The likelihood of IPs living in extreme poverty (on less than USD 1.90 a day) is three times higher than for non-Indigenous Peoples' groups. Inequality exacerbates poverty and limits enjoyment of fundamental rights. The Covid-19

pandemic has only served to amplify the impacts of inequalities, such as lack of access to water and sanitation, higher risk of disease, food insecurity and land deprivation, as reported by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The report also highlights the lack of access to appropriate public health systems and to updates about the disease in cultural and language-pertinent formats. In addition, IPs were not properly taken into account when confinement measures were designed.

A long history of land inequality

The [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) points to a strong interconnection between inequality and the dispossession or eviction of IPs from their traditional ownership, occupation and use of land and natural resources. [Land inequality has been found to be a multidimensional problem](#) that affects employment, political participation, biodiversity and social inclusion, among other aspects. It is further exacerbated by [political and market-oriented decisions that increase environmental pressures](#) such as the promotion of large-scale commercial agriculture and the expansion of monocultures, which result in deforestation, depletion of water resources and biodiversity loss, and the eviction of IPs from their traditional territories.

There is a long history of [IPs being denied their rights to their land and territories](#): Whether during land grabbing under colonial rule, or the nationalization of land and natural resources after independence, or privatization under agrarian reforms. From this perspective, IPs have been and are still excluded from their collective property rights that allow them to determine their own livelihoods.

Indigenous knowledges and climate action

Yet, there is a growing body of evidence that the management of natural resources by IPs leads to better conservation. In Latin America and the Caribbean, forests are better conserved when occupied or managed by Indigenous and tribal communities. This is the [main conclusion of a recent review of 300 studies](#) which showed that there has been a decrease in the rates of deforestation and carbon emissions where collective land rights have been recognized.

This evidence, together with [successful advocacy by regional Indigenous Peoples'](#)

[organizations like the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin](#), resulted in the issue of land being considered during the latest UN Climate Conference, CoP 26. The [Global Forest Finance Pledge](#), a promise of 12 billion USD between 2021 and 2025 to financially support forest restoration, protection and sustainable management by IPs and local communities, is promoting land tenure by IPs and forest rights for them.

Recovering Indigenous Peoples' lands

In Latin America and the Caribbean, [404 million hectares are currently occupied by IPs](#), from which 269 million hectares have been officially recognized as areas where they exercise their collective property rights. However, around 135 million hectares are still to be recognized and [land inequality is an ongoing problem](#); one that has increased during the Covid-19 crisis due to land grabbing, illegal mining, eviction of Indigenous Peoples' communities and government reluctance concerning land demarcation. Co-management arrangements for natural areas that belonged to IPs, or Indigenous Peoples' communities buying portions of their own ancestral land to obtain legal tenure, are some of the ways in which lands are being reassigned or reappropriated by their original owners.

There are cases in which IPs have recovered land and are now exercising ownership over their lands through legal agreements between governments and IPs. In the North of Australia, for example, [the Eastern Kuku Yalanji people recovered 160,000 hectares in the Daintree tropical rainforest](#) following an agreement with the Queensland state government. In the United States, an innovative form of land trust was created by the Wiyot Tribal Council. [The Council established the Dishgamu Humboldt community-led land trust \(CLT\)](#), a first-of-a-kind initiative that aims to achieve perpetual tenancy over the

land, allocating the ownership back to the Wiyot Tribe. This CLT applies solidarity economy principles by separating the value of the land from the value of buildings and projects, which means that the land is no longer a commodity and that it cannot be bought.

In December 2020, the South African President signed the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Bill (TKLA) into law. The Act grants recognized traditional leaders the power to make decisions on communal land such as signing deals with investment companies. This is a further step in the recognition of the land rights of the Khoi-San in South Africa and part of the country's overall land reform which consists of (i) land restitution, to return land to victims of dispossession; (ii) redistribution, which redresses inequality of land holdings to fulfil societal land needs; and, (iii) land tenure reform to better secure and protect contemporary land rights.

Reclaiming Indigenous Peoples' governance

Kalaallit Nunaat, or Greenland, where 88 percent of the population identifies as Greenlandic Inuit, has one of the world's most autonomous Indigenous Peoples' governments. Since the 2009 Self-Government Act, the Kalaallit have developed a public governance system and a sustainable economy approach in view of potential independence from Denmark.

Moving back to Latin America, the Autonomous Territorial Government of the Wampís Nation (GTANW) was established in 2015. It advocates for ownership by Indigenous Peoples and better protection of forests under Indigenous Peoples' management. Located in the Amazon, close to the border with Ecuador, the GTANW claims ownership of around 1.3 million hectares of land that belongs to the Wampís because of their collective rights and traditional uses

(GTANW 2015). In the exercise of their right to self-government, the Wampís Nation has legally sustained their right to govern their territory without violating any regulation issued by the Peruvian government, which is still reluctant to formally recognize the Wampís Nation.

In Chile, IPs are participating in rewriting the constitution. Following significant social mobilization in 2019 and protests in favour of a new social contract, a Constitutional Convention was established. The first President of the Convention is Elisa Loncón, a Mapuche activist and academic, who has embraced calls for a refoundation of Chile as a plurinational country. Moreover, the environmental proposals of the members of the Convention favour a change in the current development model, the recognition of the rights of nature and the adoption of the *buen vivir* concept.

Chile would be the third country in South America to include notions from traditional and Indigenous Peoples' communities, reframing its concepts and practices in environmental governance. Ecuador and Bolivia were the first countries in the region that incorporated *buen vivir* as a new regulative principle into their legislations. While Ecuador used the concept to recognize nature as a rights holder, Bolivia promotes the recognition of plurinationality in its constitution.

Spread across the globe, IPs are challenging and rewriting the foundations of the broader societies they belong to while preserving nature thanks to their traditional knowledge. The recognition and fulfillment of Indigenous Peoples' rights, including their collective rights to their lands and territories, are therefore a vital step not only for promoting human rights, but also for reframing our relationship with nature as part of a new eco-social contract.



VIDEO

“We really need a new eco-social contract”, Tarcila Rivera Zea, Quechua Activist, at #PeoplesSummit

This keynote session, part of the Global Summit “Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind”, features Tarcila Rivera Zea, founder of the International Indigenous Women’s Forum, on historical injustices and the need for a new eco-social contract.

The video portrays her perspectives as an Indigenous woman on topics such as inequity and poverty; climate and gender justice; main historical injustices; and Indigenous visions for new eco-social contracts.

The video also includes a brief presentation of the global research and action network and short video interventions from different organizations on why they decided to join the network.

→ [Click here to watch](#)



PODCAST

Human Rights for All and Historical Injustices Addressed, with Joseph Ole Simel

In this episode, UNRISD Senior Research Coordinator Isabell Kempf speaks to Joseph Ole Simel, founder of MPIDO, an Indigenous and pastoralist Maasai organization in Kenya. They discuss the process of creating the Kenyan constitution, which involved participation from civil society, Indigenous peoples and minorities. The new constitution was hailed as progressive and inclusive, addressing historical marginalization and land rights. However, after its adoption in 2010, the government’s lack of commitment to implementation led to limited progress in realizing its promises. Joseph highlights the ongoing role of civil society in holding the government accountable and emphasizes the importance of linking local social contracts with international processes to ensure climate change adaptation and human rights are upheld.

→ [Click here to listen](#)



PODCAST

Historical Injustices Addressed and a New Contract for Nature, with Mrinal Tripura

In this episode, UNRISD Research Analyst Paramita Dutta speaks to Mrinal Tripura, who among other roles, is Director of the Maleya Foundation and coordinates the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Network on Climate Change and Biodiversity (BIPNet). They discuss the importance of addressing historical injustices and climate justice for Indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Mrinal emphasizes the vulnerability of Indigenous peoples to climate impacts and the need for special attention to protect their rights, including land and access to resources. They also explore the challenges Indigenous communities face in accessing climate financing and benefit sharing at the local and national levels.

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Remedying Asymmetric Diplomacy at the United Nations

Towards an Eco-Social Contract

Costas M. Constantinou

This think piece explores a conspicuous pluralization of diplomacy in the twenty-first century. A plethora of non-state actors—minority groups, Indigenous peoples, peasant movements, NGOs, human rights activists—currently interact and network with states in different UN and non-UN settings. What kind of diplomacy should be practiced to “leave no one behind”, as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has it? And how could multilateral diplomacy at the UN be steered to negotiate a new eco-social contract that is desperately needed to rebound and build a sustainable and just world in post-pandemic times?

SOLIDARITY

In the twenty-first century, the pluralization of diplomacy is evident. No longer restricted to the management of interstate and intergovernmental relations, diplomacy has shifted from being the privilege of an exclusive club to networked multilateralism, becoming a transprofessional activity. A plethora of non-state actors—minority groups, Indigenous peoples, peasant movements, NGOs, human rights activists—currently interact and network with states in different UN and non-UN settings. In the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the values of inclusivity and participation have been flagged through the motto of “leaving no one behind”, while SDG 16 underscores the importance of promoting “peaceful and inclusive societies” and building “effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” What kind of diplomacy should be practiced to attain such ambitious goals at the international level? And, in turn, how could multilateral diplomacy at the UN be steered to negotiate a new eco-social contract that is desperately needed to rebound and build a sustainable and just world in post-pandemic times?

Between representation and meaningful participation

The ambition to “leave no one behind” could in principle be fulfilled by the right of all stakeholders to be represented in official multilateral settings, such as the Human Rights Council, the Forum on Minority Issues, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. For example, NGOs with ECOSOC consultative status have guaranteed access to sessions of the Human Rights Council and typically 90 to 120 seconds speaking time. Depending on the session and topic, this right may periodically be extended to representatives of communities without consultative status and even individual petitioners that protest a human rights violation and seek redress.

However, merely appearing at a UN forum does not suffice for effective advocacy.

Thus, non-state participants in UN forums can also organize side events where they can develop their positions, interact and advocate through targeted speeches and exhibitions. The recent increased use of virtual formats for participation in UN meetings has improved geographical reach and enabled non-state actors with limited resources to present their causes both at and beyond official events. It has, however, been recognized that digital participation offers less opportunities for effective advocacy and impactful interaction than in-person events (see the 2021 CAGI Survey on the Impact of Covid-19 on Geneva-Based NGOs). Also, worryingly, UN forums have been compromised by member states unjustly blocking the participation of non-state representatives.

To be sure, effective diplomatic engagement goes beyond mere representation and communication of interests and positions. Meaningful participation for non-state actors means the right to be fully consulted; afforded institutional tools to function adequately in asymmetric forums; allowed to submit, advocate for and negotiate proposals; as well as give informed consent over decisions and the development of legal instruments that affect lives and habitats.

Of course, not all the power asymmetries in negotiation and decision making, both between member states and non-state actors, can be redressed given the institutional constraints of the UN system. But there are some institutional mechanisms in place which can help reduce asymmetries, such as the diplomatic power of the UN Special Rapporteurs. They engage with stakeholders outside the sovereignty frame of member states, giving them more latitude in their work. They consult with stakeholders who have first-hand knowledge and issue-specific expertise, including meetings in situ and



outside UN offices. The reports of Special Rapporteurs can subsequently steer negotiations at official UN forums and their recommendations can affect, and sometimes even form the basis of, soft or hard law such as declarations, resolutions and conventions that member states vote on.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas is a good example where grassroots campaigns received institutional support initially from the Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food, and then from the Bolivian chairmanship that ensured peasant delegations were given the same time and opportunity as member states to voice their position.

Equalizing diplomacy at the UN

The idea that eco-social contracts should be created through participatory, bottom-up and inclusive processes and aim to reach reasoned agreements speaks to the aspiration of equalizing asymmetric relations and making the global polity more democratic. But not all forums are the same. At the UN alone we can distinguish (at least) two different types, whilst there are also intersections and overlaps depending on the topic. On the one hand, there are forums of justification where legal agreements are negotiated and where each side primarily makes its case. These forums may require skillful drafting

and/or constructive ambiguities and flexibility of interpretation. An example of this is the General Assembly and Security Council meetings and resolutions, where representatives are primarily advocates who justify their position and bargain across the board on the basis of received instructions to reach preassigned objectives.

There are, on the other hand, UN forums where reflection rather than justification predominates. At such gatherings, like the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the voices of experts and affected communities are prioritized, emphasizing the need to gain knowledge, understand the predicaments of interlocutors, analyse how different policies and options affect them, and provide advice and recommendations to ECOSOC.

A good example combining forums of justification and reflection is the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Even though it has an intergovernmental character and justificatory format for member states' activity concerning the SDGs, it is combined with a commitment to permanently consult with all Major Groups and other Stakeholders via various assemblies and platforms.

In lieu of a radical democratic reform of the UN—that is, making it more an organization of peoples rather than states—enhancing the meaningful participation

of less powerful actors may be achieved in two ways. These suggestions follow from [discussions](#) on how to democratize deliberation, that is, how to create better conditions for actors to communicate their positions and have a level playing field for dialogue.

First, power asymmetry can be partially rectified by interconnecting forums of justification and forums of reflection, both within and outside the UN system. Here, as already explained, the role of Chairs and Rapporteurs cannot be overestimated, and in particular their ability to recognize sites where more participatory or focus assemblies take place and to connect them to the official forum and debate. The digital transformation of diplomacy makes inclusion easier (such as through a UN extranet registering the oral statements and written submissions of all stakeholders) in otherwise partisan advocacy forums where balancing the interests of the major or powerful stakeholders may dominate the discussion.

Second, power asymmetry can be lessened by safeguarding discursive representation, which means ensuring that all relevant discourses are equally and adequately represented and explained. Discursive representation can help to equalize power imbalances, not least in the case of Governmental Non-Governmental Organizations ([GONGOS](#))—groups sponsored by governments pretending to represent civil society—that have proliferated and increasingly co-opted subaltern voices in UN forums. Discursive representation is especially important when new or emerging norms are broached into the international arena, which may not only challenge state interests but entire legal systems and established ways of thinking and operating.

The [UN Harmony with Nature Programme](#) is a good example of the UN providing a dynamic platform that seeks to cross-fertilize the dialogues of

the General Assembly, Secretary-General reports and state policies, with the discursive representations of a network of experts from around the world (jurists, ethicists, scientists, activists) who speak for the rights of nature and promote [earth jurisprudence](#).

Toward an eco-social contract

A new vision of an eco-social contract to support transformative change worldwide needs to replace our old social contract—that is, the notion that underpins modern liberal societies and social welfare provision, but which falls short of fully including everyone and protecting the global commons. Our current social contract has not addressed all forms of inequality or benefited all groups equally, including women, migrants, informal workers, Indigenous peoples and the non-human world. Indeed, the major criticism of social contract theory is that it legitimates, on the basis of presupposed consent and expected obligation, systems of governance that oppress marginalized groups as well as intensify resource extraction and the destruction of nature.

Unlike the current social contract, therefore, the eco-social contract should strive to be fully inclusive and participatory, not least in the context of the SDGs that steer a path toward a more eco-centric future. In other words, it ought to commit to equitable diplomatic engagement and minimizing inequality already at the deliberative stage. It makes a real difference who comes to negotiate how to make the world more equal and just, and following from that recognizing whose voice might be muted or only included as a token to provide legitimacy to specific legal instruments and action plans. Striving for symmetrical diplomacy is crucial and requires perseverance and innovation if our contractual commitments extend—as they should—to the non-human world and to [making peace with nature](#).



PODCAST

Solidarity: Multilateralism and the Crises of Inequality, with Georgios Kostakos

In this episode, Dr Georgios Kostakos, co-founder and executive director of the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability, speaks to UNRISD director Paul Ladd about various crises that have eroded public trust in multilateral institutions, including the UN system. They discuss how multilateral institutions have fallen short with regard to global challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic and how shifts in the global distribution of power call for an ethical approach and courage to renew multilateralism and rebuild trust. The conversation highlights ongoing efforts to reshape global governance and foster a more resilient and collaborative approach to address pressing global issues.

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VIDEO

Youth-led Solutions for a New Eco-Social Contract

In this webinar, Srity Pal and Jack Johnson share how they tackled the intersecting issues of domestic violence, feminine hygiene and the environment in Bangladesh; Sayed Masoumi and Njawwa Mbaio discuss equal access to education for women and girls in Afghanistan; and Noah Herfort and Nawshin Tabassum map the global youth climate movement to identify key moments of opportunity.

Co-hosted by UNRISD and GEC, and as part of the activities of the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract, this webinar convenes brilliant young minds for a just and equitable future. It is no secret that youth are often excluded from policy-making spaces or that their solutions to building fairer and greener societies are little known and underfunded. Here, young practitioners and youth leaders co-create a community of practice to discuss innovative solutions to the opportunities and challenges ahead.

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Implementation



TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

Evaluating Existing Transformations

The Case for a Just Energy Transition

Carlos Villaseñor

In the search for a new eco-social contract, we must not ignore the state of current global efforts to achieve a just energy transition. Proposing new forms of social contracts requires looking at the state of our current ones to identify obstacles, challenges and conflicts to come. This brief informs and expands the ongoing debate about what a more comprehensive view of a just energy transition should look like and how to achieve it—one that considers principles of justice, human rights and democracy.

In the search for a new eco-social contract, we must not ignore the state of current global efforts in the energy transition. This transition is currently defined as the transformation of the energy sector from operating mainly with fossil fuel-based sources toward a zero-carbon sector using renewable energy, for example, solar, eolic and hydraulic energy (IRENA 2022). The justification for an energy transition is a necessary response to the climate crisis, and the energy sector has already

experienced significant, albeit insufficient, progress with the supply of electricity generated by solar power increasing by 23 percent and eolic power by 12 percent in 2020 alone (IEA 2021). However, a just energy transition can achieve so much more. This brief informs and expands the ongoing debate about what a more comprehensive view of an energy transition should look like and how to achieve it—one that considers principles of justice, human rights and democracy.

What is a just energy transition?

As a concept, energy justice has a short history. This is unsurprising given that the ever-present influence of energy in our lives is also fairly recent. Today, we need energy for lighting, heating and cooling our homes; to study, work, cook and clean; and a plethora of other uses. The growing need for energy globally also makes the shortcomings of how the energy system currently operates more palpable.

Concerns regarding justice and energy first appeared in practice among civil society organizations in the late 1990s in the United States and the United Kingdom.

However, it is not until 2013, with its integration in academic study, when the three main tenets of energy justice that are now commonly used were established: distributional, procedural and recognitional justice (Heffron and McCauley 2017):

- **Distributional justice** is the fair distribution of costs and benefits, along with their associated responsibilities, in the generation, distribution and transmission of energy.
- **Procedural justice** integrates and engages all stakeholders in decision making while ensuring that their participation has equal weight on final outcomes.
- **Recognitional justice** acknowledges processes that devalue select people and identities when compared to others and aims to guarantee all individuals fair representation with complete and equal rights (McCauley et al. 2013).

More recently, the addition of a fourth principle has been considered: **restorative justice**. Restorative justice considers the harm that has already taken place and suggests what the response should be toward the victims, focusing on repairing and correcting historical damage in addition to punitive justice toward the offender (Heffron and McCauley 2017).

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The commodification of energy fosters a logic of privatization and control that reproduces the harms associated with accumulation, dispossession and perpetual growth.”

– Burke 2021

The right to energy: The question of definition

One fundamental way to foster justice-oriented actions in the way we develop the energy transition would be to establish energy as a right, shifting away from our current conception of energy as a commodity to be bought and sold. The commodification of energy fosters a logic of privatization and control that reproduces the harms associated with accumulation, dispossession and perpetual growth (Burke 2021).

However, using the language of rights is not without its pitfalls given that the proliferation of this kind of discourse can lead to its overuse and misuse (not every desired good, outcome, service, activity or principle should be a right). From this perspective, there is a need for specificity in what a right to something means, and how and where it is applied. The most common argument in defence of the need for an energy right is its consideration as a derived right, meaning that we do not see access to and use of energy as an end in and of itself but as a means to achieving a certain living standard. The question: *what do we need energy for?* becomes significant and points to the relevance of local contexts in the definition of energy as a right, in turn making a universal or global approach to its definition and implementation difficult. Equally important to consider is how energy services can satisfy energy

needs and whether some (or all) should be subject to rights claims. For example, there is a long-standing campaign in the United Kingdom concerning the right to warmth (Walker 2015; Löfqvist 2019).

Furthermore, there is a need to define what energy is. Energy is not a natural category but rather a socially constructed one materializing in multiple forms and deriving from various sources making a clear definition necessary. These distinctions and energy's definition will depend on the priorities we are aiming for in the establishment of energy as a right. For example, if it is agreed that energy must be affordable, clean or sustainable, this immediately discards some categories of forms and sources of energy and brings others to the forefront.

A second and equally critical consideration is how broadly we should envision the right to energy to be. Limiting the definition to a right to access implies a right to a connection where people can always have a steady and reliable supply of energy. However, this does not mean that there will be guarantees against exogenous constraints such as low income that may hamper the ability of individuals to use this energy supply. The right to energy at the very least must include access and use rights. Consequently, this expands considerations beyond infrastructure improvements to power grids, power plants and pipelines, to also consider pricing and billing as well as the terms of disconnection and energy efficiency (Walker 2015).

Currently, the right to energy is not explicitly recognized by any national legislation or international agreement although some regions like the European Union have stopped one step short of doing so. In recent years there have been several actions to offer wider protections to energy-poor households and the new Clean Energy for All Package requires member states to define, assess and report

the energy-poor households within their territory and to communicate the measures that are being undertaken on the matter (Hesselman et al. 2019).

The energy transition: Change the system, not just its inputs

It is impossible to talk about current efforts toward an energy transition without mentioning the 2015 Paris Agreement, the moment when the need for collective action at the global level to stop the climate crisis was formally consolidated. The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change and includes articles on keeping Earth's temperature from rising 1.5 C°, increasing resilience to the adverse effects of climate change and developing low and/or zero-emissions systems to achieve carbon neutrality, among others.

The Paris Agreement is broader than previous attempts at global international treaties on climate change and, because of this, implies the need for multiple other transformations in economies and societies. Additionally, the Agreement is not mainly driven by market forces but by long-term policy efforts which give an opportunity for citizens and stakeholders to be more involved. This drive based on policy also enables a more planned transition (Vandenbussche 2021). However, for this same reason, it also requires a greater level of coordination and agreement.

Nevertheless, actions have been taken toward a just energy transition. The global installed capacity of renewable energy is set to increase 60 percent between 2020 and 2026, accounting for over 95 percent of the increase in power capacity. China and Europe are on track to overshoot their targets and move on to more ambitious goals in their transition plans. However, 80 percent of this expansion in renewables is concentrated in these two markets along

Box 1. Energy access and Indigenous resistance in Mexico

The civil resistance organization Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo in Chiapas, Mexico, is one example of the need for local contextualization in the way a framework for the right to energy is consolidated. According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policies (CONEVAL), the organization was founded at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the poorest state of the country as a direct response to unaffordability due to rising energy prices and the constant rollback of subsidies and redistribution policies since the 1980s.

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At the root of the power structures that permeate the energy sector are extractivist and colonialist frameworks.”

with the United States and India (IEA 2021).

In addition, the NDC Synthesis Report, published in 2021 by UN Climate Change, shows the difficulty in translating ambitious targets into consequential actions. Despite most of the countries considered in the study having stronger goals in their search for emissions reduction, their current Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) show that the impact in total emissions would be a reduction of just 1 percent in 2030 compared to 2010. This stands in stark contrast with the 45 percent reduction needed to keep the 1.5 C° goal of the Paris Agreement within reach.

The largest factor at play that explains the current deficiencies of the energy transition is seldom talked about: the resilience of existing power structures. Not only do current power structures dampen the changes that must happen, but they also affect the way these changes take place. At the root of the power structures that permeate the energy sector are extractivist and colonialist frameworks. These frameworks establish dynamics of dispossession and subordination at almost every level (individual, local, national and international) and their very existence have as a goal the unfair distribution of costs and benefits (Hamouchene 2019).

As it stands, the winners and losers of the energy transition are bound to resemble the ones existing under the current energy sector, both as generators and users of energy. Women, for example, are still vastly underrepresented in leadership positions and in the workforce in the fossil fuel and renewable energy sectors. Patterns of disenfranchisement in decision making that repeat themselves at the community and household levels also continue to exist for many women despite the fact that their assigned roles in the care economy makes them more knowledgeable and more impacted by the decisions taken at these levels (TGI 2020).

Indigenous peoples around the world have had to coexist with an energy sector that operates within political and economic structures that can be incompatible, if not directly hostile, with their existence. Many of the efforts Indigenous peoples have led in defence of their rights and territory for their subsistence and survival as part of their cosmovisions, as well as for the recognition and autonomy of their livelihoods and social structures, has resulted in repression, violence and displacement (PFII 2022).

The oil, gas and carbon sectors represent a history of wage theft, deriving partially from the constant cycle of layoffs and new hires according to price fluctuations, and experiences high mortality rates when compared to other industries (Dickson et al. 2020). An energy transition that does not consider the need for reskilling and upskilling workers to adjust to the new jobs that will be created and does not establish proper procedures to promote workers’ participation in defining working conditions (Vandenbussche 2021) can and will duplicate the inequalities of the fossil fuel industry.

Finally, the shift toward renewable energy has been long sustained by innovation and the fast-paced development of

Box 1. Energy access and Indigenous resistance in Mexico (continued)

Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo’s response was to stop paying for electricity, disconnect their meters and connect themselves manually to the power grid. They organized themselves out of a need to guarantee security and a long-standing tradition of organized activism that persists in the region. The paradigm in which they saw the access and use of energy had three main driving forces (Cao and Frigo 2021):

1. A primordial, supernatural gift of Judeo-Christian origin mediated by Liberation Theology: Electricity comes from natural resources that the divinity gifted humanity to live from and to care for.
2. A relational ontology dependent on Mayan cosmovisions: Being part of the “living whole”, natural resources are communal. No one can ever be denied access to them for subsistence. Furthermore, humanity has to protect the cosmos with a role of custodian.
3. A non-commodified view of nature, whose origins are twofold: The Mayan worldviews on one side, and anti-capitalist ideology on the other. More specifically, activists oppose the exploitation of natural resources when it is aimed at the accumulation of capital, and not for the purpose of subsistence.

new and better technologies. However, innovation—specifically technological innovation—has presented several instances of bias resulting from using predominantly white male subjects as the universal model. The New York Times and Vox have both reported that the last few years have been plagued with cases of gender and racial bias in artificial intelligence and the reticence of the actors who created the biases in the first place and those hired to fix them. Google’s firing of Timnit Gebru is one of the most blatant examples (Metz 2021). In the specific case of climate change, initiatives like Stanford University’s Gendered Innovations Programme has insisted on the need for an intersectional framework where questioning assumptions and biases that may be driving analyses is built in by design.

What does systemic change in a just energy transition look like?

There is a need to integrate technological change with socioeconomic and political change as a means to achieve a more democratic and just energy transition. This would allow for the full potential of the energy transition to come into play. However, we must also understand that this shift is part of an existing movement which had its origins in grassroots organizations and activism challenging

existing power systems and seeking the normative goals or ideals that we aspire to within this redefinition (Szulecki and Overland 2020).

It is important to note that, so far, this brief has been mainly framed by European and American thought—the regions where most of the literature comes from—and it is from the American conceptualization that we get the most commonly accepted goals of energy democracy: To resist existing energy systems and to reclaim social and public control over them as a way to restructure the sector so that it abides by democratic principles like the ones laid out when speaking of energy justice. However, disagreements persist regarding what each of these goals mean for every actor, for example, what role the state should play in this process.

Despite the quick progress of this relatively new concept, a just energy transition will inevitably clash with existing structures in the energy sector that operate under current global and regional power dynamics. The Energy Charter Treaty, signed mainly by countries in the European Union, is a good example. Originally conceived as a way to protect investments in energy projects that cross state borders, it is currently being used as a tool to sue signatory countries that are trying to move away from fossil fuels and/or nuclear energy and shutting down projects related to them. Similar examples are bound to appear as the energy transition progresses and the concept of energy democracy takes hold.

The conceptualization of the outcomes and the means to achieve them can happen to varying degrees. Ian Gough (2021), when visualizing the outcome of a fair transition, considers the redefinition that will have to occur to the existing welfare states, picturing two potential scenarios. The first of which establishes a Green New Deal Framework, meaning an expansion of green capital spending both

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If there is any hope of achieving a just energy transition, there is an urgent need to address inequality at all levels and resolve unbalanced power relations.”

in the private and public sector, coupled with what he names a “social guarantee” that ensures an acceptable level of human security and well-being, particularly in the collective provision of essential goods. In the second scenario there is an emphasis on the previously mentioned unfair distribution of costs and benefits in the energy sector, mainly through the recognition of the responsibility of rich welfare states leading to regulation on consumption levels.

Other authors, like Burke and Stephens (2017), undertake a more granular analysis of the intended outcomes of the materialization of energy democracy and the policy instruments commonly used for this purpose. They signal some essential instruments like the statutory priority for demand reduction and distributed generation, which aims to tackle the problems of unsustainable patterns of consumption and the decentralization of energy production; renewable energy standards that establish targets of the proportion of the total energy produced that derive from renewable sources; as well as practices they consider worth discussing despite not having widespread implementation like the use of public bonds as a financial tool for energy democracy.

There is no universally effective solution to implementing a just energy transition and taking into account regional, national and local contexts will become increasingly important. For example, income is positively correlated with a rise in carbon emissions when using a consumption-based model instead of a territorial one. Furthermore, when observing emissions reduction drivers together, it is possible to cluster nations in groups that reflect existing hierarchies of development. This means that there is a core of wealthy consumers when compared to other groups in varying degrees of periphery (Lamb et al. 2014). If there is any hope of achieving a just energy transition, there

is an urgent need to address inequality at all levels and resolve unbalanced power relations. Despite the diversity of circumstances, some general observations and recommendations have been made when approaching the energy transition in developing countries. One concern is that there will be a negative impact on unmet energy demand and generation costs for low-income countries which could deter them from carrying out large scale investment in renewable energy (Afful-Dadzie et al. 2020). Similarly, there is a need to rethink the centralization of incentives and mechanisms for clean and sustainable development in a handful of developing countries while also broadening national and international incentives beyond the power sector to include others like cooling/heating, transport or urbanism and infrastructure (Vanegas 2020).

An increasing sense of community is also an element commonly associated with energy democracy. There is a growing trove of practical and theoretical knowledge in the creation and regulation of energy commons. While the current energy sector has operated under traditional economic incentives, focusing on large-scale projects and infrastructure that generate natural monopolies and big barriers to entry, the energy commons is one way to foster and strengthen social relations based on cooperation and co-responsibility. The most common form to emerge from this approach is the establishment of renewable energy cooperatives locally owned and managed by communities. Exploring other ways of public ownership and management, like municipally owned utilities or community grids, is equally important (Burke 2021).

However, the energy sector does not operate in a vacuum. While the decarbonized energy sector becomes increasingly valued as the energy transition progresses, it forces us to confront issues largely ignored like the presence and effects of corruption, nepotism, tender

Box 2. A bottom-up, inclusive energy transition

The Energiewende is the current gold standard when it comes to an inclusive energy transition. The German case study begins with the country-wide nuclear phase-out after the disaster in Fukushima Daiichi in 2011 while retaining their key environmental targets in reducing greenhouse emissions. Furthermore, the case study shows no negative impacts on economic growth and only positive indicators for all possible scenarios.

Despite some obstacles and setbacks, what sets this energy transition apart— besides its success under conventional economic and political metrics— are Energiewende’s actions. They restructured their policy process to be bottom-up with the proliferation of local energy cooperatives that, in just two years between 2010 and 2012, almost doubled in quantity from 392 to 700, granting inclusiveness and the redistribution of benefits that come with the transition. In addition, the rapid appearance of new actors within new paradigms of energy generation led to the expansion of the energy grid with public consultation at the forefront of the process.

rigging, bribery and tax evasion (Sovacool 2021). Proposing new forms of social contracts requires looking at the state of our current ones to identify obstacles, challenges and conflicts to come. At the policy level there is a need to create new ways of translating commitments into real policy action that promotes multi-disciplinarity in the energy transition and takes into account the lived experiences of the marginalized and their local contexts (Bouzarvoski et al. 2021).

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VIDEO

Shaping the Eco-Social Contract: Perspectives on Just Energy Transitions from Around the World

A basic principle of the just transition toward ecologically and economically sustainable societies is the need to address the challenges of the energy sector and accompanying crises of energy poverty and insecurity. The development of a reliable, sustainable and affordable energy sector that can meet these challenges is arguably the largest economic transition facing every society in every corner of the world today. To shape a new eco-social contract that works for both people and the planet, we must grapple with the practical and ethical challenges of a just energy transition that takes into account lessons learned from different regions.

Co-hosted by UNRISD and the International Energy Poverty Action Week (IEPAW), this webinar draws on the work of the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract and Carlos Villaseñor's issue brief "Evaluating Existing Transformations: The Case for a Just Energy Transition" to open up a broader conversation on how different regions are shaping just energy transitions at a time of global energy insecurity.

Privileging marginalized voices from the global South, panelists respond to the Network's recent research and present their own lived experiences and priorities to identify a possible path forward for achieving a just transition in the energy sector.

→ [Click here to watch](#)

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HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

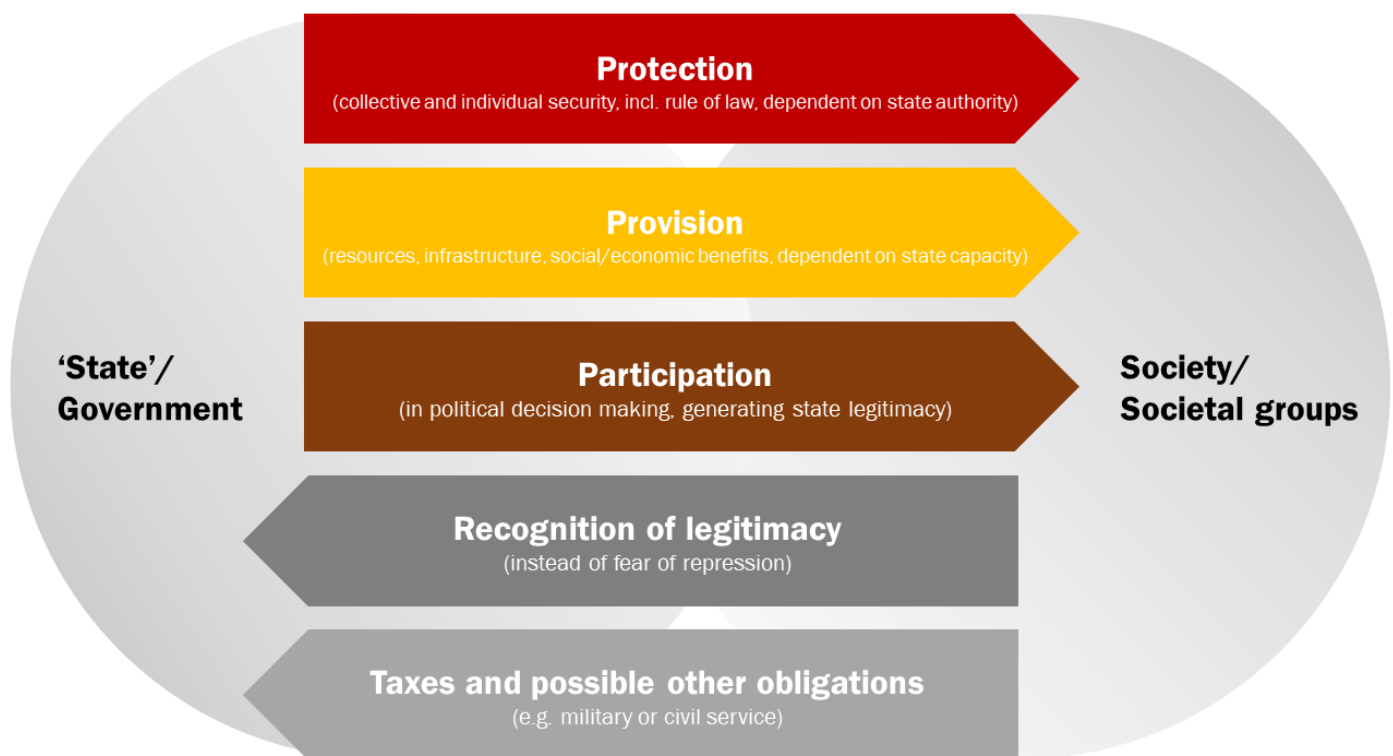
TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

Climate Change: Threat or Potential Opportunity for Social Contracts in the MENA Region?

Annabelle Houdret
Markus Loewe

Climate change, natural resource degradation and lack of inclusiveness challenge existing social contracts in the Middle East and North Africa. This think piece looks at how environmental factors influence governments' scope of action to deliver on their duties of protection, provision and participation within current social contracts and proposes an alternative solution that can work for both people and the planet.



Source: Loewe, Markus, Tina Zintl, and Annabelle Houdret. 2021. "The social contract as a tool of analysis: Introduction to the special issue on 'Framing the evolution of new social contracts in Middle Eastern and North African countries.'" *World Development*, 145. doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.104982.

Climate change challenges societies in multifarious ways: it affects water, food and energy supplies, and has serious repercussions on health, education and consumption which will fundamentally alter how and where we live in the coming years. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), countries are particularly vulnerable to these effects and will be even more exposed in the future. It is estimated that many MENA countries will experience GDP losses of 20 percent by 2050 if climate policies do not change. Extreme temperatures, severe droughts, floods and rising sea levels threaten infrastructures, agricultural production, economic development, health and livelihoods, and are likely to trigger migration. Beyond the physical impacts climate change has on natural resources and the environment, it also changes key determinants of state-society relations: New social contracts are in the making.

A social contract lens to better understand the impacts of climate change

Applying a social contract lens helps us to understand the impacts of climate change on state-society relations to identify core challenges for political stability and inclusive development and to design adequate policies. It refers to the sum of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant social groups and the sovereign (government or other power holder) on mutual rights and obligations. In short, the state or government grants *protection*, *provision* and *participation* (the "three P's") in exchange for citizens' loyalty and societal contributions in the form of taxes, military service or other obligations, as detailed in the illustration below.

Climate change affects this often already fragile arrangement in several ways. It

challenges states in their function of *provision* and *protection*, for instance when droughts and extreme weather events destroy livelihoods and infrastructure. Water, sanitation and hygiene must be secured in an already alarming context of water scarcity. Where governments fail to do so, this quickly instigates mass protests, such as those already experienced in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Maghreb region. Climate change also mercilessly affects rural livelihoods and food security. When governments miss providing social protection schemes granting compensation and alternative sources of income to citizens, they fail to deliver on their part of the social contract thereby threatening their own legitimacy. Providing water, land and sustainable risk management instruments, including in conflict settings, is therefore elemental for any government.

In terms of citizen *participation* in the design and implementation of policies, MENA governments are already falling short. In the turbulent times of climate change, providing citizens with channels for participation is crucial: Making water users' voices heard when governments need to implement difficult decisions on water scarcity, access rights and pricing, and for finding cooperative arrangements to deal with limited arable land or relocation are all key for developing ecologically and socially-just sustainable solutions. Moreover, it is evident that failure to deliver *protection*, *provision* or *participation* in the context of climate change can also be a major trigger for migration, resource competition and conflict, even if causal relations are complex and need to be studied in more depth.

Social contracts can undermine ecological sustainability

While many of the effects of climate change indirectly undermine governments' ability to deliver the three P's, many social contracts, especially in the MENA region, are designed to incentivize contracting parties to model modes of behaviour that accelerate climate change and the overexploitation of natural resources. For example, many governments continue to pay energy subsidies, thereby discouraging decarbonization efforts and strengthening reliance on oil and gas exports. Likewise, influential elites often secure access to water for irrigation at the expense of the needs of smallholder farmers and other groups and the environment. Features of this kind contribute to political stability in the short term and often favour powerful social groups whose backing is particularly important for the survival of governments.

However, the devastating impacts these arrangements have on the environment are already visible, such as in the overexploitation and pollution of water and land resources and in the continuing rise of CO2 emissions. The ecological basis of current social contracts is eroding, and access to natural resources or benefits from their exploitation, which governments still use to serve strategic elites, are becoming more and more restricted. Granting privileges to some undermines social justice and nurtures grievances among less advantaged groups, which in turn also questions governments' legitimacy. Current social contracts in MENA are therefore unsustainable from a long-term socio-political and ecological point of view.

Toward an inclusive and sustainable social contract

The distribution of access to natural resources results from stipulations in social contracts and mirrors the distribution of power in state-society relations. However, some social groups do not have enough power to achieve satisfying results in the predominantly implicit negotiations over social contracts in their countries. Small farmers or nomads, for instance, typically do not have a political lobby. The social contract model presented above helps to bring the interests of less influential social groups into consideration, but also shows that different deliverables are intrinsically linked to development and the sustainable use of natural resources. It encourages taking a longer-term perspective and thereby caring about the satisfaction of all contracting parties, but also of environmental needs.

Furthermore, the eco-social contract model helps to identify concrete entry points for the integration of social inclusion and environmental sustainability in policy making in MENA countries. The provision of public services such as access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene, healthcare and livelihoods must aim to respect distributive and environmental aspects more systematically. For example, climate-sensitive provisions of public services like housing and infrastructure that uphold against natural disasters can help foster resilience, and urgently needed—but often delayed—reforms in water governance by decentralizing and introducing affordable solutions for water mobilization, access and use.

Additionally, citizen participation in the design and implementation of sector policies and [access to environmental information](#) should be strengthened to ensure that the interests of all populations are considered. Such steps are crucial for

securing state legitimacy and stability, even more so in times of [shrinking spaces for civil societies](#) and environmental activism across the MENA region. Equal and active participation can also help develop adequate adaptation policies and mobilize ownership for their implementation. Finally, the protective dimension of government deliveries should be strengthened because some issues—such as access to clean drinking water—are not only a matter of provision, but even more so of protection against parching and starvation.

Despite the challenges raised, climate change has the potential to be a trigger for more sustainable and inclusive reforms, including new, environmentally sustainable social contracts. Combining [insights on existing social contracts in the MENA region](#) and [natural resources](#) with UNRISD's call for a new eco-social contract is one possible avenue for understanding and addressing related challenges. In this way, the (eco-)social contract approach facilitates identifying key issues at stake in the transformation of state-society relations under climate change conditions. The political economy regarding access to natural resources (water, land, minerals) or the distribution of benefits from their exploitation (fossil fuels, metals) is certainly one of these key issues.

Understanding what governments and societies need for a successful eco-social contract can inspire a debate about a new “global common good”, where the common future of states and societies lies in sustainable development pathways at the global as much as at the national and local levels.



HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

A CONTRACT FOR NATURE

Putting Food Justice at the Centre of an Eco-Social Contract

Kiah Smith

This think piece describes how a new eco-social contract can be extended through the principles and practices of food justice. Drawing on findings from the “Fair Food Futures” project, an Australian Research Council-funded study that explores how Australian civic food networks envision and work toward food justice, the author argues that it is often interconnected social and economic inequalities—around food insecurity, hunger, poverty, gender and health—that underpin the complex sustainability challenges associated with food system transformations. To shift unequal power relations requires addressing rights, resilience, intersectionality and “food as commons” concepts.

From food security to food justice

Rising global hunger should make it overwhelmingly clear that current food system dynamics represent a breakdown in the social contract. While we produce enough food to feed Earth's population 1.5 times over, scholarship widely demonstrates that hunger results from inequitable access to healthy, affordable and sustainable diets, alongside damaging production–consumption practices that generate food waste. High food prices are driven by supermarket concentration, financialized supply chains and the environmental “externalities” of industrial food systems at the expense of local and regional agri-food cultures and economies. Decisions over food governance are often beyond the control of ordinary people. Hunger is further reproduced by rising income poverty and social exclusion, both products of power imbalances and both strongly associated with class, race and gender inequalities.

One starting point for these failures is the overemphasis on food security approaches instead of food justice approaches. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)'s food security pillar of food availability (supply, quantity and quality) privileges food production at the expense of addressing inequalities at the heart of people's experiences of hunger. Growing *more food* dominates agricultural policy making but has not led to reduced hunger. Second, while the other pillars of FAO's food security model (access, utilization and stability) suggest that inequities have a role to play, it remains that sustainability and people's agency—their *right to food* and *right to shape their own relationships with the food system*—are dimensions of food security that are often left out of mainstream debates.

I argue that the concept of food justice provides a necessary foundation for

enabling eco-social justice, going beyond food security. Food justice aims to eliminate structural inequalities that drive hunger, ensure that benefits in food systems are shared more fairly and improve people's control over the food system. This vision, according to Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, “goes beyond one in which wealthy consumers vote with their forks in favour of a more environmentally sustainable food system to imagine that all communities, regardless of race or income, can have both increased access to healthy food and the power to influence a food system that prioritises environmental and human needs over agribusiness profits.” Food justice, therefore, goes beyond availability, access, utilization and stability to redress *how, by whom and for whom* food is produced, distributed, consumed and governed.

“

The concept of food justice provides a necessary foundation for enabling eco-social justice, going beyond food security.”

— Kiah Smith,
Project leader,
Fair Food Futures

Over the past decade, I have looked to civic food networks for evidence of the types of deeper transformations that are needed in Australia, where I live. Even though Australia is a wealthy food-exporting nation, domestic hunger is significant—in 2022, over two million households (21 percent) experienced severe food insecurity, with renters, low-income households, those on welfare payments and children being particularly vulnerable. Indigenous Australians are five to six times more likely to be food insecure than other Australians.

The good news is that Australia has a vibrant and growing “fair food” movement. These diverse initiatives and coalitions provide lessons for constructing a new eco-social contract, precisely because their solutions radically shift focus from food security to the social and environmental inequalities associated with power, privilege and oppression.

Investigating Fair Food Futures in Australia

Since 2019, my Australian Research Council-funded project, *Fair Food Futures*, has engaged over 100 participants including small-scale producers, alternative distributors, community gardeners, food charity representatives, policy makers, academics and “food citizens” in participatory research. We asked: *What does your fair food future look like, and how do we get there?* We used an innovative future scenarios methodology to explore multiple pathways for reform.

Our study found multiple drivers of and barriers to food justice. The growth of local food networks was identified as the most important driver, despite constraints by the dominant model of long supply chains, exports and processed foods. On the other hand, the economic model that generates food waste was identified as a key barrier; at the same time, solutions that reimagine economies to recycle nutrients were seen as key opportunities when based on degrowth. Third, participatory governance (or lack thereof) was seen by participants as both a lever for, and barrier to, progressing social justice in the food system. Other factors mentioned in the study impacting food justice include:

- Shifts toward sustainable agricultural production, such as agroecology or permaculture;
- New thinking about the role of charities, welfare and a universal basic income;
- Urbanization and rural decline, the rising cost of farmland and tensions

between land needed for food versus mining;

- Food activism, ethical consumption, climate action and decolonization movements led by youth and First Nations peoples that will continue to grow into the future;
- Improved health, nutrition awareness and education;
- Technological innovation in big data, digital communications and decentralized ownership; and
- Tensions around the recognition and enforcement of human and Indigenous rights, including the right to food.

Four principles for eco-social food justice

In *Fair Food Futures*, our co-created future scenarios identify pathways needed to achieve food justice in a more integrated way. These are:

1. Intersectional solidarity and care

Drawing on a combination of ideas from food sovereignty and the global women’s movement, this pathway commits food system actors to redressing enduring injustices (for example, colonialism, racism and sexism) by connecting food with wider issues such as housing, income, healthcare, gender equality and Indigenous sovereignty. Policies should aim to extend care to a wider array of food system actors and social groups, as well as to non-human food system agents such as animals and ecological systems. This places a strong requirement that the state improves policy coherence by bringing together economic, agricultural, consumer, health, gender, environmental and social policy.

2. Food and rights for all

The unequal distribution of hunger is a significant human rights issue, and there has not been enough progress toward pursuing food security within a human rights framework. Human rights-focused

approaches have the potential to address the impact of government action or inaction, including the structural causes of social inequities. But while Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out the Right to Food, very few countries have actually legislated it into national and state food policy making. This pathway challenges us to rethink what we consider as “good” or “bad” food, how it is grown and who has access, and calls for an urgent redesign of governance to better facilitate concrete human rights outcomes.

3. Food systems as a common good

Food systems failure is entangled with other system failures related to energy, water, land, biodiversity and climate. This can be attributed to commodification and extractivism that sets the value of the natural world through market mechanisms. Contesting this opens space to re-imagine the food system as a common good.

This pathway values land, air, water, soil, biodiversity and seeds for their role in ensuring the health and well-being of all, and values more equitable control of the food system as a key pillar of democracy. In practical terms, for example, cities can be places where food is grown and shared on the streets, in verge gardens, parks, backyard gardens and community garden spaces. Food as a common good—not a commodity—can be supported and regulated through grassroots democracy where ordinary people set the agenda with space for First Nations’ worldviews and peoples to direct change.

4. Resilience beyond crisis

This pathway acknowledges that future crises under climate change and social inequality are inevitable, and so food systems must become a source for change. This reverses the dominant focus on how to make food systems more resilient. Instead, “resilience as

Pathways to Transformative Action on Zero Hunger

This project found that **different futures are possible**, with multiple scenarios available for reducing hunger and achieving food justice.

These futures will be achieved by **changing mindsets and practices** to help communities and policy makers debate equitable pathways to achieve Zero Hunger, and help to improve policy participation from civil society.

4 FUTURES 4 PATHWAYS

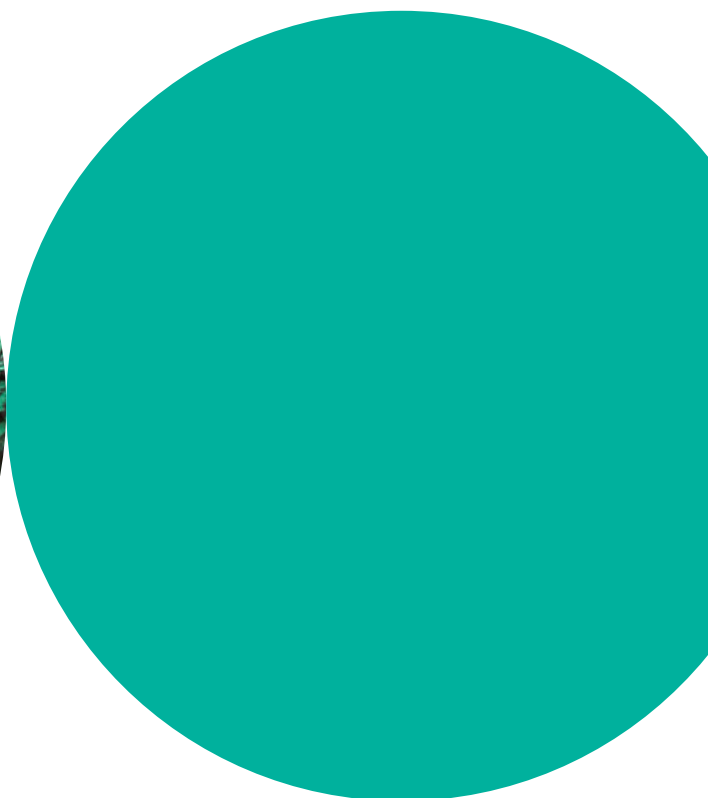


Source: Fair Food Futures.

transformation” refers to our capacity to create a fundamentally new system that, according to [Emily Boyd and her co-authors](#), “allows undesirable socioeconomic states (for example a system characterized by deep deficits in income, power, education and social capital) *to be transformed into more desirable ones* without threatening the integrity of the atmosphere or the ecological systems on which humans depend.” In food systems, such a shift requires a rapid move toward localizing food production, distribution and consumption in line with practices of agroecology and the circular economy, redirecting financial profits to benefit local communities and ecologies, and shifting decision making to reflect long-term goals. A practical example from our research is the scenario of [Technology for the People](#), whereby technological innovation is redirected toward enhancing resilience only when it also promotes degrowth transitions centred on care, localization and using fewer resources in line with planetary boundaries.

Civil society: The catalyst for change

In listening to civic food networks, this research indicates possible directions for a new eco-social contract with food justice at the centre of food system transformation. This underscores a “deep systems” approach, whereby food security goes beyond production or consumption to prioritize addressing the systemic causes of hunger, food poverty and inequality. It will require urgent reform of food systems to respect, protect and enhance ecological systems on which all life depends (land, soils, water and seeds), through practical policies that support shorter supply chains, agroecological and regenerative farming practices, circular food economies, real climate action and degrowth. This will only be achieved with improved participation of civil society in food governance. In Australia, this should include the establishment of a National Food Policy Council led by civil society stakeholders, with the urgent addition of Right to Food legislation driven by government and supported by the private sector.



Putting Women at the Centre of Sustainable Development

Rethinking the Eco-Social Contract

ElsaMarie D'Silva

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

GENDER JUSTICE

The social contract is not working for women and girls in many places. This think piece focuses on the situation in India and highlights innovative solutions using technology to crowd-source data and mobilize communities to prevent violence against women and girls. Such bottom-up approaches and new forms of solidarity will be key in developing a new eco-social contract.

“

For most of history, Anonymous was a woman”

Adapted from Virginia Woolf

My country, India, ranks low on many indexes measuring the treatment of women. In 2021, the [World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index](#) listed India 140 out of 156 countries. [Georgetown University’s Women, Peace and Security Index](#) listed it at 148 out of 170 countries.

Because of the deep-rooted patriarchal culture across the country, women are often treated as second-class citizens, despite the right to equality and a life of dignity and safety guaranteed them by the [Indian Constitution](#). This [inequity is evident from birth](#), with sex selective abortions resulting in only 899 female births for every 1000 male births. There is also [poor representation in political leadership](#): Only 8.4 percent of the members of the State Legislative Assembly are women. [Female participation in the labour force is low and falling](#), from 26 percent in 2005 to 20.3 percent in 2019. And violence against women and girls is pervasive. For instance, National Crime Research Bureau statistics indicate [there is a rape reported every 15 minutes](#).

Because of this discrimination, women and girls have fewer options, choices and opportunities for schooling and work, which in turn affects their financial security, independence and well-being. It is apparent that the social contract between individuals, communities and government institutions is not working for women and girls. Clearly, we need to rethink the social and systemic structures that enable this

culture of violence and discrimination. It is not right, and it is detrimental to a country’s progress and future to exclude almost 50 percent of the population.

Crowd-sourcing women’s empowerment

My organization, [Red Dot Foundation](#), works to address some of these inequities. We encourage people to share incidents of sexual and gender-based violence that they experience on our [Safecity](#) platform. Thus far, we’ve documented over 40,000 reports in total, 88 percent of which were from women, across both urban and rural areas. This data is then collated as location-based trends and visualized on a map as hotspots. Our volunteers analyse the dataset at the neighbourhood level in their cities to look for patterns and understand the local factors contributing to the violence. Individuals and communities are then empowered to use this information to develop relevant interventions and prevent the violence.

To accompany this work, we also hold workshops and advocacy campaigns in schools, workplaces and communities where we educate people on their sexual and reproductive rights, violence prevention, challenging harmful gender norms and unconscious bias, strategies for safe intervention as by-standers, and we encourage them to report violence formally to the police but also on the [Safecity](#) platform.

Over the last seven years since I co-founded the organization, we have engaged urban and rural youth and women to use their local datasets to learn about the nature of gender-based violence, engage their communities in dialogue on conscious and unconscious bias and harmful gender norms, work with institutional service providers like the police, campus administrations in schools and colleges, and civic authorities to find solutions that will prevent and/or address the violence.

Our work has given women access to information which they can use to reclaim their agency and access opportunities for their personal and professional advancement. Three stories illustrate what I mean.

Story 1

Convincing the Sarpanch

In a rural village in the Satara district of Maharashtra, the women were reluctant to engage the men of their village in dialogue on sexual and gender-based violence. But when they presented the Safe-city data for their village to their Sarpanch (head of village), he insisted that they use a religious community gathering to discuss the issue. With his endorsement, their confidence to break the silence and engage in discussion increased. They formed support groups, and held meetings with the community police to address domestic violence and educate the villagers on their rights.

Story 2

Holding institutions to account

In a community in Pune, the women and girls did not leave their homes after seven in the evening as they were told it was not safe. After analysing the Safecity data for their area and studying the physical infrastructure, they were able to identify poor street lighting as part of the problem. They engaged in dialogue for the first time with not only their elected representative but also the local police. The street lights were fixed and now women in this community feel confident staying out later at night. The additional hours outside the home allow them to access more opportunities—extra school classes, taking up small jobs, having more time for chores or simply meeting friends.

Story 3

Challenging toxic masculinity

Engaging men and boys is also critical. Take for example, Mohan in Sanjay Camp, New Delhi. He and his friends had placed a couch outside the only women's public toilet in the neighbourhood. The boys would hang out there and crack jokes when

the girls came, often taking pictures and videos of them without their consent. This made the girls feel extremely nervous, and many even limited their water intake to avoid using the toilet. When these incidents showed up in our dataset, we asked the girls what they wanted to do. They bravely invited the young men, including Mohan, to a meeting. On seeing the data and hearing how the girls felt, he realized the impact of his behaviour. He joined the campaign on safe neighbourhoods with the girls, became a peer educator—and convinced his friends to remove the couch.

Changing cultures of violence

Micro projects like this have resulted in girls returning to school, women taking up employment, and women having increased confidence to talk about taboo topics around sexual and reproductive health; they have begun to question conscious and unconscious bias and harmful gender norms, and negotiate for greater freedoms. Vital support is also provided by our programmes which match young girls with established women leaders as mentors. These relationships offer a network of support as the young girls explore new options, giving them a role model to emulate and a sounding board for aspirational goals. Many girls from these programmes have ended up pursuing higher education, starting their own organizations, taking higher paying jobs and following their dreams like writing a book.

The SafeCity programme works because changing cultures of violence is partly about policies, but it's also about giving people a voice. By making it easy for people to share their stories, report incidents of sexual and gender-based violence and transparently showcase data, we can also hold institutions accountable. And while the Indian Government has several schemes for women's empowerment, including the *Beti Padhao*, *Beti Bachao* (educate the girl, save the girl), they do not go far enough.

Learnings for a gender-just social contract

What is needed is a renewed gender contract which mandates investment, radical cooperation and partnerships to create equitable and safe societies. Some learnings from our work are:

Invest in resources to end gender-based violence:

- Fund more disaggregated data collection to track violence and build in accountability from institutions;
- Comprehensive education on women's rights starting from a young age;
- Stricter implementation of laws and quality infrastructure for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Engage men and boys to be allies.

Educate them to promote women's rights and safety, and challenge conscious and unconscious bias.

Commit two percent of GDP

to scale up gender-based violence prevention, protection, and response programming domestically and internationally, with some funding earmarked for care policies.

Address the digital divide.

Utilize technology for remote work, remote education and remote networking, and governments must invest in good digital infrastructure and safety protocols to foster a safe environment.

Encourage women's economic participation.

Create diverse jobs for women in urban, rural and semi-rural areas and set up networking opportunities and support groups.

By revisiting the gender contract in our communities and having a gender perspective in policies and laws, we can meaningfully increase the active participation of women in society, economic activity and leadership. The time is now to put women at the centre of development not only because it is sustainable, but it is the right thing to do.

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GLOBAL STUDY ON NEW ECO-SOCIAL CONTRACTS

The different contributions in this global study aim to catalyse debates and knowledge exchange. They explore examples of twenty-first-century eco-social contracts and the processes driving them; draw on pluralistic approaches; produce context-specific solutions and give renewed visibility to local value systems and communitarian imaginaries; and suggest pathways to harmonize our relationships with nature and future generations. They identify what must be done to ground social contracts in democratic and participatory processes that provide necessary legitimacy and buy-in. This compilation contains short articles, issue briefs and blogs written by members of the Global Research and Action Network for a New Eco-Social Contract, visiting fellows, and UNRISD staff and collaborating researchers.



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