

Evaluation of United Nations Research Institute for Social Development UNRISD (2008-2013)

Final Summary Report (Draft)

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Evaluation of United Nations Research Institute for Social Development UNRISD (2008-2013) Final Summary Report was researched and written by a team formed of researchers from Policy Studies Institute; the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, a partnership between Kingston University and St George's, University of London and independent researchers Halina Ward and Teresa Jones.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CODESRIA	Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSocD	(UN) Commission for Social Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DFID	Department for International Development
DUCI	Daryl Upsall Consulting International
ECLAC	(UN) Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ECOSOC	(UN) Economic and Social Council
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FLACSO	Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin America Faculty of Social Sciences)
GBP	British Pounds Sterling
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IILS	International Institute for Labour Studies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
ISSC	International Social Science Council
IT	Information Technology
LSE	London School of Economics
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PBRF	Performance Based Research Fund
PSI	Policy Studies Institute
RBM	Results-Based Management
RED	Research and Evidence Division
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SRP	Structural Reform Plan
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
TDR	Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases
UN-DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS
UNAM	United Nations Association of Malaysia
UNCSD	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDAW	United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNFAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund (formerly United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UN-NGLS	United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service
UNOG	United Nations Office at Geneva
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNU-MERIT	United Nations University - Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology
UNU-WIDER	United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research
USD	United States Dollars
WESS	World Economic and Social Survey
WFP	United Nations World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

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Summary

This report presents an evaluation of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) during the period April 2008 - March 2013. The evaluation was commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and performed by a team lead by Policy Studies Institute (PSI) in London, over the period July 2013 - May 2014.

UNRISD

UNRISD was established in 1963 as an autonomous research institute within the UN system. Its overall goal is to generate knowledge and articulate policy alternatives that address urgent social development challenges, and contribute to a reduction in poverty and inequality. To achieve this goal, UNRISD has pursued three objectives in the period from 2011 to 2014:

1. Undertake research that illuminates social development challenges and contributes to the articulation of policy options relevant to the current context of crisis and uncertainty;
2. Increase the recognition and use of its research within the United Nations system, the donor community, academia and civil society in order to influence policy and practice; and
3. Secure the long-term financial stability of the Institute through an increase in funding and diversification of funding sources.

Based at the United Nations Office at Geneva, at the time of the evaluation, UNRISD had a core staff working under UN contracts of nine and approximately 16 further research analysts, interns and visiting research fellows. To maintain its autonomy to undertake independent research and provide a neutral ground for policy discussion UNRISD remains financially independent of the UN system. In 2012 its total expenditure was \$3,432,857, sourced from voluntary contributions from governments and other donors. Over the period of the evaluation UNRISD staff numbers and expenditure have both reduced. In 2008 the core UN staff was 16 and expenditure \$4,712,132.

Aim of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess UNRISD's performance during the period April 2008 – March 2013 and provide a rigorous and independent assessment to identify lessons and implications for UNRISD as it moves forward on:

- The quality and relevance of UNRISD research and research uptake;
- The outcomes and impacts of UNRISD research, including influence on the policies and programmes of the United Nations' (UN) secretariat and other funds and programmes;
- UNRISD value for money and organisational management.

Approach to the evaluation

A mixed methods approach was used for the evaluation with data being collected in two phases. Document and bibliometric analyses were conducted first and these informed a second stage of data collection consisting of:

- Telephone, internet and face-to-face interviews with UNRISD staff and 40 UNRISD stakeholders,

- An online survey of the 898 people in the UNRISD research network,
- Observation of UNRISD staff and activities, including two visits to UNRISD and attendance at UNRISD events,
- A session with UNRISD staff to explore the organisation's approach to research quality.

Data from the documents, interviews, observation and quality session were analysed thematically and the surveys were analysed both quantitatively and thematically. The resulting findings, conclusions and recommendations from the work are summarised below.

Key Findings and Conclusions

UNRISD has a good story to tell...

Overall, the evaluation presents a picture of an organisation with a good story to tell.

Delivery of Research Strategy and Uptake

The evaluation has found clear and strong evidence that UNRISD is successfully and effectively delivering its research and uptake strategies. UNRISD, overall, is an institution that plays an agenda-setting and bridging role between ideas coming from the development community, national policymakers, and the UN system, simultaneously connecting the worlds of academia and policy action. It is valued by stakeholders, both for the social development research it conducts and for the role it plays within the UN system. UNRISD's convening power is also highly regarded.

Over the evaluation period with a relatively small level of resource, UNRISD has produced a large volume of high quality outputs in a range of formats across a diverse range of social development issues. UNRISD is seen to be highly productive by staff and stakeholders. Evidence from this and other recent evaluation work shows UNRISD outputs to have good uptake and global reach. UNRISD policy briefs were regularly cited as highly valued outputs, as were events, major conferences and flagship reports. The quality of UNRISD outputs is perceived to be high by a very large majority of interviewees and survey respondents contacted during the evaluation.

UNRISD's engagement of Southern researchers/perspectives is one of the strengths and successes of the organisation. It may even amount to a function that UNRISD fulfils uniquely well compared to other organisations working on social development. Many positive comments came from the interviews on UNRISD's engagement with Southern researchers. It was also clear that there are real benefits both to UNRISD, the UN system and to Southern researchers from this engagement.

Praise was high for UNRISD's work on gender and the leadership role that UNRISD had played in this arena. Gender has not only been addressed as a distinct theme, but mainstreamed through integration across UNRISD's work and had furthermore had impacts on the wider UN system's consideration of gender issues.

As well as its research work UNRISD has developed and implemented a successful communications and outreach strategy, thereby addressing one of the major issues raised in the 2006 evaluation.

From consideration of documents, and interviews with staff and stakeholders, many of whom have worked with UNRISD as partners, staff or board members, UNRISD is a well-managed organisation that delivers value for money. It has effective systems in place for developing and implementing its strategy and reporting on its achievements. Combined with UNRISD's high productivity and stakeholder perception of value the view of an organisation delivering value for money is reinforced.

Outcomes and impacts from UNRISD's work

UNRISD's work has resulted in impacts in multiple parts of the UN system, wider international institutions and more broadly in the global social development research community, particularly among researchers in the Global South.

UNRISD has been able to reframe and set policy agendas within the United Nations and at national levels; shine a light on important social policy areas where high-quality research is often thin on the ground; explore links between particular social policy topics and wider structural issues within the global economy; and bring the perspectives of researchers based in middle and low-income countries to the fore.

Three types of impact from UNRISD work were identified in interviews:

- *Framing impacts*: particularly by changing the language, or boundaries of key social policy debates, with implications at both international and national/regional levels,
- *Direct impacts*: particularly through contributions to a wide range of UN policy documents and processes and by bringing research-based evidence to policy and expert fora at international, regional and national levels,
- *Indirect capacity-building impacts*: particularly by strengthening the voice of Southern research collaborators in national and regional policy processes and enhancing the availability of high quality and locally generated research on social policy in middle and low-income countries.

These impacts were observed in multiple research/policy areas including: gender and economy of care; social policy as development; social protection floors; transformative social policy; universalism; social dimensions of sustainable development, the green economy; corporate social responsibility and social and solidarity economy; poverty and inequality, finance and social policy.

But there have been, and remain, some important constraints on UNRISD's work...

These achievements have been delivered in spite of significant constraints on UNRISD. Reduced availability of funding following the post-2008 financial crisis, and, in particular, core funding has been a particular constraint. Pressures to be more responsive to donor needs and more directly demonstrate value for money outputs have grown. Review of the UN system, and the role and structure of research organisations within it, was active over a significant part of the evaluation period. This created uncertainty around UNRISD's future as an autonomous research institute within the UN system with likely knock-on effects for its fundraising.

The size of the organisation places very real limits on what it can do given the breadth of social development issues it could work on and number of partners it could work and engage with.

...And there are challenges for UNRISD to address

While UNRISD has achieved much in the evaluation period and at a time of significant constraints, as with any organisation, there remain challenges for it to address if it to maintain and develop its role.

In spite of the significant steps that have been taken to improve UNRISD's communications and outreach work, a need emerges from the evaluation for UNRISD to continue its efforts to better communicate its unique functional role and organisational niche and raise its profile within the UN system. There are opportunities to better integrate UNRISD's research and communication/outreach functions.

UNRISD needs to consider and respond to the implications of a rapidly developing relationship between research, knowledge, policy and practice for UNRISD's work and research.

Institutionally, UNRISD could more transparently embed quality processes into the conduct and presentation of its work and respond to the value for money agenda of many donors by taking steps to more actively demonstrate it is a learning organisation building on its Results-Based Management system.

Finally, and most significantly, there remains the challenge of developing a sustainable funding model that is capable of maintaining UNRISD's unique role and value but that also acknowledges a changing environment for the funding and practice of research and the delivery of uptake and impact from it.

Recommendations

While UNRISD has achieved much during the evaluation period, there are still challenges it needs to address if it is to deliver its mandate more effectively and move towards greater financial security.

Recommendation 1: UNRISD should continue to work to communicate its niche to more effectively articulate and distinguish the unique role it plays in social development policy and research. This needs to combine aspects of its UN setting and relationships; the strength of its networks in the Global South; and the role it plays in linking these networks to the UN and wider social development research and debates.

Communications and outreach

Recommendation 2: UNRISD should continue to develop its approach to communications and outreach giving particular attention to existing core audiences in the UN system and its research networks but also national and regional-level partners and distinctive branding of its outputs.

Recommendation 3: Greater prominence must be given in all communications activity, whether publications, events, meetings, emails, telephone calls, web-based, social media etc. to clearly and succinctly articulating UNRISD's unique organisational niche, functional role and funding basis.

Putting UNRISD at the cutting edge of social development knowledge transfer practice

Recommendation 4: UNRISD should reflect on what it means to be a research institute working at the interface of social development research, knowledge and policy in the 21st Century. This will

need to consider the focus of its research, the research methods it uses and mechanisms for delivery of research uptake and impact and building new approaches into its institutional strategy for 2015-onwards.

Enhanced user engagement through policy-led knowledge transfer and responsive research

Recommendation 5: UNRISD should explore developing a workstream around social development knowledge transfer and responsive research as a means to engage with new policy users on their agendas of interest.

Institutional management

Recommendation 6: UNRISD should collate its existing knowledge of and responses to institutional risks and present these annually to the UNRISD Board for comment, advice and development.

Recommendation 7: Given the central importance of the research quality to delivering its objectives, and to maintain its high standards, UNRISD should more explicitly address quality in its work through building shared staff understanding and approaches to quality in research.

Recommendation 8: UNRISD should explore an approach to value for money based on generating an institutional culture that demonstrates the learning and innovation capacities of the organisation and complements its Results-Based Management system.

Funding

A positive resolution to UNRISD's funding situation is critical to its long-term future and success. Seeking project or programme funding is time-consuming; yet it will be essential for the foreseeable future. The forthcoming donor meeting is an important event at which UNRISD and donors will need to reflect on UNRISD role and the changing context it operates in and agree how the strengths and value this evaluation have identified can be better supported. Both UNRISD and donors will have to make advance preparations for this meeting.

Recommendation 9: UNRISD should continue to work with current and recent past funders to secure short to medium-term funding and develop other medium to long-term options following that. UNRISD should adopt and develop responses to the other recommendations in this report to assist in securing funding by more clearly demonstrating to potential funders the unique role of UNRISD and the value it brings to social development research and policy.

A final challenge to donors: Invest in the long-term

Some of UNRISD's core strengths lie in its ability to carry out long-term studies in multiple countries, generating significant and methodologically robust new data and insights that gather part of their validity as a result of their timeframe. In a world where short-term considerations too often trump long-term creation of social value, this is a challenge that UNRISD and the donor community need to resolve jointly. To invest in UNRISD for the long-term is to invest in a public good. UNRISD provides a valuable and important part of the collective institutional and human capacity carefully to analyse and shape social development policies and processes in our interconnected world. UNRISD's value is clear but its future needs to be secured.

1. Introduction

In 2013 the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its formation. The timeline¹ of UNRISD activities and milestones since 1963, which was released as part of the celebrations of this anniversary, reveals a rich history of activity focused on social development research and involvement in the international debate and policy responses to them. As stated in the current institutional strategy:

“Its [UNRISD’s] enduring purpose over almost half a century has been to exercise leadership within the United Nations system in generating knowledge and articulating policy alternatives on contemporary social development processes and problems.”

p2, UNRISD, 2011a

This evaluation focuses on the more recent work on UNRISD between April 2008 and March 2013, not just to understand the achievements of the organisation but also draw out lessons and recommendations to assist UNRISD in the delivery of its future work. The evaluation was commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and performed by a team lead by Policy Studies Institute (PSI) in London, over the period July 2013 – May 2014.

1.1 UNRISD

UNRISD was established in 1963 to create an autonomous research institute within the UN system. Its mandate established it as:

“an autonomous space within the UN system for the conduct of policy-relevant, cutting-edge research on social development that is pertinent to the work of the United Nations Secretariat; regional commissions and specialized agencies; and national institutions.”²

UNRISD’s institutional strategy (UNRISD 2011a) articulates the unique characteristics which enable it to play this distinctive and challenging role:

- It is the only organization within the United Nations system dedicated exclusively to undertaking multidisciplinary research on contemporary social development issues.
- As an autonomous agency governed by a Board of leading scholars operating in their individual capacity, UNRISD has the freedom to produce critical, high-quality research and to provide a neutral ground for debate and discussion.

¹ For details of the timeline of 50 years of UNRISD activities see:

<http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BE6B5/search/96DF9355D584CA78C1257C2100397379?OpenDocument>

² UNRISD’s Mandate and Mission are available at:

<http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BF3C2/%28httpPages%29/1889BA294D2950E08025791F005CD710?OpenDocument>

- It is the centre of an extensive global network of academic, policy and advocacy institutions that both participate in and use UNRISD research.
- Located under ECOSOC, it has the institutional channels to promote the flow of research findings, ideas and information between its multiple partners and the United Nations system.
- It is small and flexible with the capacity to be responsive to new social issues and problems as they arise.

Based at the United Nations in Geneva, at the time of the evaluation, UNRISD had nine staff working under UN staff contracts and approximately 16 further research analysts, interns and visiting research fellows. To maintain its autonomy to undertake independent research and provide a neutral ground for policy discussion UNRISD remains financially independent of the UN system. In 2012 its total expenditure was \$3,432,857 which was sourced from voluntary contributions from governments and other donors. Over the period of the evaluation UNRISD staff numbers and expenditure have both reduced. In 2008 the staff with UN contracts was 16 and expenditure \$4,712,132.

UNRISD's overall goal is to generate knowledge and articulate policy alternatives that address urgent social development challenges, and contribute to a reduction in poverty and inequality. To achieve this goal, UNRISD is pursuing three objectives in the period from 2011 - 2014:

1. Undertake research that illuminates social development challenges and contributes to the articulation of policy options relevant to the current context of crisis and uncertainty;
2. Increase the recognition and use of our research within the United Nations system, the donor community, academia and civil society in order to influence policy and practice; and
3. Secure the long-term financial stability of the Institute through an increase in funding and diversification of funding sources.

To deliver its goals and objectives UNRISD:

- Undertakes and coordinates multidisciplinary, cross country comparative research,
- Uses this research to challenge mainstream ideas and provide alternative visions to frame and shape policies on social development issues,
- Given its location and research agenda, uses its convening power to engage scholars, policy makers and civil society group in the North and South both to inform debate and policy in the UN system and in their own policy and advocacy work,
- Expands access to global networks and provides a platform to increase the visibility of Southern researchers in academic and policy fora.

1.2 DFID support for UNRISD³

The United Kingdom, through DFID, has provided core support to UNRISD to:

- Deliver high quality research to contribute to better understanding of social development and poverty reduction challenges, that incorporates Southern perspectives; and
- Communicate results effectively to reach relevant stakeholders about its research projects and policy findings.

The intended outcomes of this support were that key stakeholders (policy communities, civil society and academia) should access and use knowledge generated through UNRISD research to fill social development and policy gaps (including on gender); that research contributes to re-framing academic and policy debates, and suggestions of alternatives for development practice. These outcomes were intended to contribute to strengthening the integration of social concerns and policies in development policy and practice.

Overall, the support was intended to lead to research by UNRISD having an impact through more effective and sustained social policies for the achievement of poverty reduction and development impacts that benefit all people regardless of gender, age, or other characteristics, particularly in developing countries.

DFID support to UNRISD in the evaluation period was formalised in two separate Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) for the period from April 2008 - March 2013, amounting to a total of £2,470,000. The first MoU was for £1,520,000, covering April 2008 - March 2011, was to support UNRISD research activities in four programme areas:

- Social Policy and Development
- Gender and Development
- Markets, Business and Regulation
- Civil Society and Social Movements.

The second MoU (£950,000 from April 2011 - March 2013) provided core support to the overall research agenda (and to necessary staff costs), but was also intended to track performance in three key programme areas:

1. Politics and Institutional Dynamics of Social Development
2. Social Development Response to Climate Change and Political Economy of Climate Change
3. Research Uptake.

The latest DFID logframe follows a results chain logic of outputs to outcome to impact, and focuses on two of the outputs in the broader institutional strategy (production of research, and communications and uptake of research results). Strong efforts were made by DFID to ensure that the indicators used matched those in the UNRISD Results-Based Management system.

³ This section is based on an edited version of the information given in the project Terms of Reference included in the DFID Invitation to Tender for this evaluation.

1.3 Evaluating UNRISD

There has been significant work to evaluate UNRISD and action to enable it to better deliver its research programme and uptake and impact from it. The evaluation of UNRISD's work between 1996 and 2005 (Nayyar et al., 2006) highlighted significant strengths and value in its role, activities, programme of research and international standing. The same evaluation highlighted issues around UNRISD's scale, security of funding and employment practices and a lack of profile and awareness of its work amongst potential users. Subsequent institutional strategies have been put in place to address these which have incorporated a Results-Based Management system and further external monitoring and evaluation activity has been undertaken (e.g. DFID, 2012; Mathiason and Arora, 2012). We return to the progress that has been made on the issues identified by earlier evaluations in our conclusions in section 3.9.

As such this evaluation has sought to build on this substantial body of work and support the existing institutional strategic and management activity intended to address the issues previously identified.

1.4 Conceptual model for the evaluation

Although there is a growing interest in impact evaluation for both learning and accountability⁴, the challenges in conducting meaningful evaluations are widely recognised and we explore these further in section 2.4. As we noted in our proposal, the need to underpin evaluation activities with an explicit conceptual understanding of the relationship between knowledge, policy and practice is often overlooked.

For this evaluation, as a conceptual model we have used the model of thinking about how to bridge evidence and policy/practice – or knowledge to action – proposed by Best and Holmes (2010). This approach suggests that there are three phases of development in an organisation's approach to knowledge transfer and promoting impact. The three generations of thinking are: linear models, relationship models and systems models.

The first is concerned with a simple linear model of communication and dissemination: research is conducted and then communicated to users who then use it. The second focuses on developing knowledge transfer opportunities through building relationships, networks and stakeholders: introducing a two-way interaction between research and use. In the relationship model, knowledge is seen to come from a range of sources (research, theory, policy and practice) and the effective use of knowledge is dependent on the relationships and processes existing to enable and reconfigure the interaction of these actors.

The final systems-based phase sees knowledge transfer occurring in a more complex and continually evolving system. The actions, priorities and capacities of multiple actors shape both the interactions

⁴ Which is captured well by the UKCDS webpages at http://ukcds.org.uk/page-Research_Impact_Evaluation-197.html

and knowledge needs of actors within the system (and subsystems within it). Change in one part of the system can affect another part of the system, perhaps unpredictably. Successful knowledge transfer needs to acknowledge the nature of complex systems and requires consideration of the types of evidence actors in the systems want or can use, action at multiple levels of the system, collaborative leadership to generate knowledge and strategic communication activity. Importantly, it is argued by Best and Holmes that each subsequent phase adds to rather than replaces the former so that systems approaches are complemented by communication systems and networks with stakeholders.

We return to this issue later in the report in section 3.8 on the conclusions to be drawn from the evaluation.

1.5 This report

This summary report presents the key material, conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation. It is accompanied by full evaluation report which gives full details of the evaluation objectives, methods, findings, conclusion and recommendations.

This section of the report has provided an introduction to UNRISD, DFID's support of UNRISD and an outline of the conceptual model underpinning out analysis. Section 2 details the evaluation objectives and research questions providing an overview of the approach and methods used and their limitations.

Section 3 summarises the conclusions and findings in relations to the evaluation's research questions, insights from the conceptual model and progress made since the previous evaluation and we make our recommendations in section 6.

2. Evaluation Objectives, Research Questions and Methodology

2.1 Evaluation Objectives

The purpose of this evaluation, as indicated in the Terms of Reference included in the Invitation to Tender, is to assess UNRISD's performance during the period of April 2008 – March 2013. It has two broad objectives. The first is to assess UNRISD's performance for accountability and lesson-learning purposes. The second, as part of this overarching objective, is to evaluate the performance of DFID's specific support during this period.

Specifically the focus of this evaluation is to provide a rigorous and independent assessment to identify lessons and implications for UNRISD as it moves forward on:

- The quality and relevance of UNRISD research and research uptake;
- The outcomes and impacts of UNRISD research, including influence on the policies and programmes of the United Nations (UN) secretariat and other funds and programmes;
- UNRISD value for money and organisational management.

2.2 Research Questions

The Terms of Reference specifies the primary research questions the evaluation is intended to address (questions A and B and 1-4 indicated below).

A) How effectively is UNRISD delivering its research and uptake strategies, having careful regard to outputs (volume, types and quality), engagement of Southern researchers and perspectives and mainstreaming gender?

B) What have been the intended, unintended, positive and negative outcomes and impacts of UNRISD research?

Other key evaluation questions that relate to research question B include:

1. What role has UNRISD played in providing thought leadership and contributing research on important knowledge gaps, both within and external to the UN?
2. How effectively has UNRISD managed risks and responded to changes to the external environment (e.g. changes in funding)?
3. To what extent did UNRISD performance and delivery provide Value for Money?
4. What are key insights on how UNRISD may strengthen quality and relevance of research, enhance impacts and boost value for money?

Finally, a cross-cutting theme of the evaluation was to assess how effectively UNRISD is delivering

the research and uptake strategies specifically supported by DFID and whether this activity represents value for money.

2.3 Overview of Approach and Methodology

A mixed method approach was used to evaluate the performance and impact of UNRISD and draw lessons for how it can more effectively deliver research and uptake and impact from it. The approach collected and utilised data from document analysis (internal and external), interviews with staff, research users and stakeholders (face-to-face and telephone/internet interviews), surveys of stakeholders and research users, and, bibliometric analysis.

The approach builds on and complements the significant body of existing relevant material from external evaluations, internal UNRISD documents, including data from its Results-Based Management system and other sources. The document analysis, which took place at an early stage of the project, was an important part of the work, intended to ensure an effective use and allocation of the evaluation resources available, by building on rather than duplicating existing evaluation work.

An important aspect of the evaluation was collaboration. This occurred, firstly, at project inception with the users of the evaluation (DFID, Sida) to develop a shared understanding of the key research questions, methods and outputs desired, and secondly, with UNRISD staff, which required time at UNRISD to develop relationships with staff and gather documentary data and staff knowledge, of the processes of research agenda setting, commissioning, delivery, uptake and impact processes.

Data collection and analysis for this evaluation was comprised of the following main elements:

1. Document analysis
2. Bibliometric analysis
3. Interviews with UNRISD staff and stakeholders
4. Online survey of UNRISD stakeholders
5. Observation of UNRISD working methods and events
6. Quality session with UNRISD staff.

Details of each of the methods, caveats associated with them and the findings emerging from them are presented in the full evaluation report accompanying this summary report.

2.4 Limitations of approach

As acknowledged in the introduction, the challenges of conducting meaningful research impact evaluations are widely recognised. These include: the attribution of impacts to specific activities of the organisation being evaluated amongst many possible causes, the timing of impacts in relation to the outputs that led to them – there may be a delay between outputs and impact occurring, the availability and reliability of data and lack of process data (see for example, Bell et al., 2011). The most commonly raised issue of attribution relates to the extent to which impact can be attributed, at least in part, to one particular research organization (or programme or project) among many

contributing to the development of knowledge and ideas. Most of the challenges identified in the literature point to the need for mixed method approaches to impact evaluation to allow data from multiple sources and methods to be analysed and synthesised to give a reliable assessment of the organisation under consideration.

These well-known challenges of evaluation are exacerbated by the setting of UNRISD in the UN system and its role. The organisation is a small one but in a very large and globally diffuse network of stakeholders and possible users of its outputs. Uptake and impact can occur in the UN system and member states as well as distributed global actors in the social development research community and beyond. The project has been a relatively short one and has been dependent on accessing relevant and representative respondents. There is a risk of biases occurring towards respondents who are easier to access. As such the evaluation design was intended to combine data collected from multiple sources by different methods to give quantitative breadth and qualitative depth. The limitations of individual methods are addressed in the respective methodological section in the full report sessions below and we return to the issue of the confidence in the evaluation's overall findings in the conclusions section.

3. Conclusions: findings in respect of the evaluation's key research questions, conceptual model and progress since previous evaluations

In this section we bring together our overall findings from the evaluation and the conclusions we draw from it under the main research questions for the evaluation. The two main research questions A and B and four further sub-questions for the evaluation were:

A) How effectively is UNRISD delivering its research and uptake strategies, having careful regard to outputs (volume, types and quality), engagement of Southern researchers and perspectives and mainstreaming gender?

B) What have been the intended, unintended, positive and negative outcomes and impacts of UNRISD research?

1. What role has UNRISD played in providing thought leadership and contributing research on important knowledge gaps, both within and external to the UN?
2. How effectively has UNRISD managed risks and responded to changes to the external environment (e.g. changes in funding)?
3. To what extent did UNRISD performance and delivery provide Value for Money?
4. What are key insights on how UNRISD may strengthen quality and relevance of research, enhance impacts and boost value for money?

3.1 Consistency of results within and between methods

The findings from each of the methodological elements of the evaluation are almost entirely consistent with one another. There is therefore little need to triangulate between the different methods or account for inconsistencies between methods. There is still a need to come to a view on the differences observed or expressed within the data collected for each method and consider our overall confidence in the evaluation's findings. With regard to differences observed or expressed in the evaluation it is our role as evaluators on the basis of weight and quality of evidence to interpret the data and come to a conclusion as to its meaning, which we do below. With regard to the overall confidence in the findings, the consistency between methods increases the confidence in our findings. The sample size and response rate in the survey and relatively large number of interviews we have conducted also increases confidence in the findings.

The one observation we would make is that in relation both to the survey and the interviews, almost (but not quite) all respondents have had a degree of active engagement with UNRISD. In some cases this has been a very close engagement which has allowed us to explore issues in more detail than with 'interested but un-engaged' respondents. Selection bias may have resulted in more positive accounts of UNRISD's performance over the evaluation period. However, in the event that a large number of stakeholders' experiences had been negative we would have expected to detect this.

3.2 How effectively is UNRISD delivering its research and uptake strategies?

Research question A) How effectively is UNRISD delivering its research and uptake strategies, having careful regard to outputs (volume, types and quality), engagement of Southern researchers and perspectives and mainstreaming gender?

UNRISD has clearly stated institutional and research strategies. The institutional strategy has two objectives relevant to this research question:

“Research

Objective 1: Knowledge generated through UNRISD research contributes to a better understanding of, and greater pluralism in approaches to, contemporary social development and poverty reduction challenges.”

“Communications and Influence

Objective 2: UNRISD research is used by stakeholders within the United Nations system, academia and civil society, and influences policy and practice on social development and poverty reduction.”

Research for Social Change, UNRISD Institutional Strategy 2011-14 (UNRISD, 2011a)

The institutional strategy clearly articulates the outcomes desired for these objectives and activities intended to lead to them, specifying research themes to be worked on, and process and institutions to be targeted in the work.

This evaluation has found clear and strong evidence that UNRISD is successfully and effectively delivering its research and uptake strategies. UNRISD has played, and continues to play, an agenda-setting and bridging role between ideas coming from the development community, national policymakers, and the UN system, simultaneously bridging the worlds of academia and policy action.

Volume of outputs

In terms of volume of outputs UNRISD is widely acknowledged to be highly productive by staff and stakeholders and particularly so given its limited resources. This is clearly supported by an examination of the range and volume of material available on the UNRISD website. It is also clearly documented in UNRISD management reports, for example, its Annual Progress Reports covering the evaluation period (UNRISD, 2009a, 2010a, 2011b, 2012a, 2013a), and also highlighted by other external work, for example, the Sida Mid-term Review (Mathiason and Arora, 2012) and DUCI report on fundraising (Daryl Upsall Consulting International, 2012).

Types of outputs

Stakeholders reported awareness of the range of UNRISD outputs – research, publications, events, communications and direct engagement. UNRISD policy briefs were regularly cited as highly valued outputs as were events, major conferences and flagship reports, particularly, the most recent of these, the Combating Poverty and Inequality report (UNRISD, 2010b). Further concise and easy to access summaries for policymakers were requested by stakeholders, and there were also

suggestions for a wider range of event formats including webinars and targeted regional/country-focused events, for example on launch of major reports. UNRISD has already been able to pursue the latter approach (i.e. regional launches) in relation to its *Combating Poverty and Inequality* report (UNRISD, 2010b) without dedicated funding by ‘piggy-backing’ on other activities, and has reported that the report was in 2010 ‘launched’ at 21 events in 16 countries (UNRISD, 2011ba, para 278), and in 2011 in 20 events in 12 countries (UNRISD, 2012a, paras 46-50).

Longevity of outputs

A conclusion to be drawn from the bibliometric analysis for UNRISD and its donors is that the longevity of its outputs, at least its major outputs such as flagship reports should not be underestimated or overlooked. For UNRISD this prompts questions about how best to capture and maximise the value in outputs which generate sustained multiyear impacts, or have the possibility to do so. For donors the sustained impact of the publications studied highlights the need to realise that the full impacts or benefits of contributions to UNRISD may only be revealed in the longer term, typically after the end of a particular period of support.

Quality

The overall quality of UNRISD outputs was perceived to be high by a very large majority of interviewees and survey respondents: when asked about the quality of UNRISD outputs 89 per cent of total respondents awarding a high rating of either 4 or 5 out of 5. A session on quality with UNRISD staff also revealed the clear commitment of UNRISD staff to producing high quality work and an understanding of the central importance of quality to successful delivery of UNRISD’s mandate. This, along with interviews with staff, also revealed the mechanisms that are already in place to ensure high-quality research is delivered, including through peer review processes, careful selection by UNRISD staff of research partners and joint processes for the co-production of research. It was also clear from the stakeholder and staff interviews and quality session that ‘quality’ is a concept with multiple dimensions. Stakeholders hold differing perspectives and prioritise different elements of quality, for example, related to academic rigour, fitness for purpose, timeliness, relevance, nature of contribution or research outputs.

While UNRISD outputs are considered high quality, one of the insights from the quality session was that there could be greater transparency in relation to the quality process used in generating UNRISD outputs; for example by providing more information, even only in summary, about methodological approaches and research limitations in reports and briefings.

Engagement of Southern researchers

Based on evidence from the document and bibliometric analyses, interviews, and stakeholder survey, UNRISD’s engagement of Southern researchers/perspectives is one of the strengths and successes of the organisation. It may even amount to a function that UNRISD fulfils uniquely well compared to other organisations working on social development. Findings from the online survey are supportive of UNRISD’s progress during the evaluation period 2008-2013 in this regard, with 34 per cent of Southern respondents reporting that they became aware of UNRISD within the last 5 years, in contrast with 29 per cent of northern respondents. 50 per cent of Southern respondents joining within the last 5 years first became aware of UNRISD and its work through either its online publications or UNRISD events

Many positive comments came from the interviews on UNRISD's engagement with Southern researchers. This finding was supported by the online survey with stakeholders indicating that at least a majority stakeholders feel UNRISD engages and involves them in decisions about the topic, aims and outputs of research or events in which they are actively involved. It was also clear that there are real benefits both to UNRISD and to Southern researchers from this engagement. Benefits include the input of Southern perspectives to UNRISD work and wider debates particularly into the UN system; the financial efficiency and knowledge benefits of working with researchers who are already in-country; and also the capacity-building function that engagement has for the researchers concerned and their wider networks. Both staff and stakeholder interviews revealed clear and meaningful efforts to engage with Southern researchers throughout the research process from agenda and objective setting onwards through delivery of projects.

Mainstreaming gender

In interviews praise was high for UNRISD's work on gender and the leadership role that UNRISD had played in this arena. Our clear impression was that gender had not only been addressed as a distinct theme, but mainstreamed through integration across UNRISD's work and had furthermore had impacts on the wider UN system's consideration of gender issues.

Uptake of UNRISD research

The bibliometrics work conducted for this evaluation indicates above-average citation rates in a range of different types of outputs for the UNRISD reports considered. This is likely to be a good proxy indicator of the uptake of UNRISD research. The bibliometric analysis also points to the wide global reach of the UNRISD reports considered and their use by a range of target bodies, both within and outside the UN system. While only three documents were considered in the bibliometrics work (to allow a more detailed assessment of their reach and use) when considered alongside the findings from previous bibliometric work (e.g. as reported in Mathiason and Arora (2012) which showed good levels of citations for UNRISD outputs), we consider that there is a strong basis for suggesting that our new findings are likely to be broadly typical of UNRISD's wider outputs.

Communications and Outreach

Communications and outreach are vital steps in delivering uptake. The previous Sida-funded evaluation of UNRISD (Nayyar et al., 2006) highlighted dissemination of UNRISD's research as a weakness that needed to be addressed. UNRISD has responded in a number of ways, offering high level management support to work to develop and implement a stronger approach to communications, recognising the strategic value of this area. This has included commissioned external advice (Gaught Conlon and Associates Ltd, 2011) and a detailed communication strategy has been developed with a clear articulation of the goals, audiences, products and channels for communications and outreach (UNRISD, 2012b).

Outputs from the implementation of this strategy include a greater number of short policy briefings; better branding of UNRISD and its outputs; and investment in the UNRISD website and social media – with the latter generating significant numbers of followers and participants. Our observations of UNRISD in action indicated an organisation with a strong and well organised approach to communications and outreach. These investments seem to be bearing fruit and are clearly

appreciated by UNRISD's audiences. The strong alignment revealed in the online survey between UNRISD's articulation of its main roles and stakeholder understanding of them is reassuring and suggests these have been clearly and effectively communicated to its research networks and with a strong probability to other stakeholders as well. The online survey also revealed that UN respondents were more likely to agree than other respondents that a main role of UNRISD is that it 'challenges conventional thinking' (95 per cent versus 85 per cent) suggesting that it clearly seen as playing a role bringing new voices and perspectives into the UN system and processes.

At the same time, UNRISD's approach to outreach and communications was mentioned by a number of interviewees as an area where it could do more, or better. We are conscious that some would not have been aware of UNRISD's staff and budget constraints in arriving at these conclusions, nor the implications of the challenges, identified in the communications strategy of UNRISD's size, diversity of audiences and complexity of messages. However, an issue which emerged in the interviews, survey and observation alike concerned the clarity of information and communications from UNRISD in relation to its role and ways of working. In particular, we found a lack of awareness of UNRISD's funding model and by some stakeholders (including potential partners) a lack of awareness that it receives no core funding from the UN budget. We return to this issue in the recommendations.

UNRISD's outreach and communications strategy also has a significant role to play in addressing those areas where UNRISD's real-world impacts have lacked visibility – including for example in relation to processes leading to ILO and General Assembly work on social protection, which, interviews indicate, may have been heavily informed by UNRISD research. We recognise that there may be sensitivities here given the collegiality of working within the UN system; but we would conclude that UNRISD's own approach to outreach and communications holds part of the solution to ensuring that UNRISD's stakeholders give it the full recognition that it deserves.

Reaching policymakers and specialists at national and local levels also presents particular challenges. While there could be value for UNRISD in stepping up its direct outreach work in these settings, we recognise that this creates a further large set of target audiences to communicate with and maintain relationships with.

3.3 What have been the outcomes and impacts of UNRISD research?

Research question B) What have been the intended, unintended, positive and negative outcomes and impacts of UNRISD research?

This research question was explored through the four sub-questions that follow below. One important observation to make before this is that over the evaluation period UNRISD has made a significant commitment to, and progress on, tracking outputs, impacts and outcomes and on institutionalising these processes, notably, but not exclusively through its Results-Based Management system. This is an important means by which outcomes and impacts are captured.

Below we provide a more detailed narrative of three specific case studies of impact, chosen to illustrate UNRISD's experience in three different areas of its work: influencing policy; working with

UN agencies; and shaping the social development agenda. There were identified during the evaluation team's discussions with UNRISD staff and developed from these discussions and documentary evidence and stakeholder interviews.

Case study 1 – UNRISD influencing policy

UNRISD works closely with a number of other UN organizations and departments in order to fulfil the part of their mandate concerned with shaping policy within the UN system. The aims of this case study are twofold: to describe an episode of influence and to demonstrate the challenge of attribution in assessing influence. This case study focuses on UNRISD's relationship with one UN department and one particular episode of influence. It highlights a challenge for researchers seeking both to influence policy and to demonstrate this influence. Impact on policy is notoriously difficult to trace. This case study draws on interviews with staff, stakeholder interviews and document analysis. However, it was only through more informal discussions with staff that the example came to light.

UNRISD has a close working relationship with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), involving regular and frequent interactions with multiple divisions. For example: they report to the Commission for Social Development and they are part of the Executive Committee for Economic and Social Affairs – participating in regular meetings to discuss issues. They regularly make written inputs into DESA reports and participate in task forces and working groups on specific issues. A senior official from DESA represents the Secretary General on the Board of UNRISD.

At the time of writing this case study, UNRISD were co-moderating and drafting part of the 2014 Annual Ministerial Review document (a process managed by UN-DESA) and they were part of a group advising on the 2014 World Economic and Social Survey report (WESS) produced by DESA.

To focus on one recent episode of influence, in February 2013 Sarah Cook, presented a paper at a Commission for Social Development (CSocD) panel meeting on '*The social dimension in the global development agenda beyond 2015*' at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. UN-DESA acts as a secretariat to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and its associated commissions and committees (including CSocD). Informal conversations between Sarah and UN-DESA staff at the panel meeting focused on the work UNRISD had been doing that was relevant to the social development agenda of ECOSOC.

Some months later UNRISD was approached by UN-DESA and asked by them to write a briefing paper on the social drivers of sustainable development for CSocD. This issue was on the agenda^{5,6} of Fifty-Second Session of the CSocD in February 2014. Peter Utting, Deputy Director of UNRISD, produced a 20 page briefing note drawing on a wide range of UNRISD research relevant to the topic. Peter identified this as an excellent opportunity to feed into UN policy and 'dropped everything' for

⁵ See <http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2013/PanelDiscussions.aspx>

⁶ Details available at: <http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014.aspx>

two weeks to prepare the note. When a draft of the UN ECOSOC Secretariat report⁷ came from UN-DESA it retained much of the original text and the list of references to relevant UNRISD research. However, from an impact tracking perspective, it was not clear that UNRISD had played a key role in drafting the paper. The UNRISD contribution was not explicitly noted and Peter was not listed as an author. However, UNRISD were not unhappy with this outcome as they felt it was important that UN-DESA owned the document. Furthermore, some of the changes that had been made weren't completely in line with the UNRISD analysis of the issue and policy solutions. The report is listed as a background paper on the agenda for the meeting in February 2014 (ECOSOC, 2013). Sarah Cook attended the meeting on behalf of UNRISD. The communications team produced a shorter version of the note as an UNRISD brief, for distribution at the meeting and more widely during the Commission's session. Sarah also moderated the formal panel on the same topic at the Commission for Social Development.

Case study 2 - UNRISD working with UN agencies

As part of its programme work on Social Policies for Inclusive and Sustainable Development, UNRISD has developed a stream of work around the potential and limits of social and solidarity economy (SSE). UNRISD issued a call for papers on this topic in 2012. The papers are being published as a research paper series, in an edited volume and as a special issue of an academic journal. They have also been used to generate 'think pieces' including a paper framing the issue in a UN and historical context. A blog entitled '*What is Social and Solidarity Economy and Why Does It Matter?*' was posted on Duncan Green's influential Oxfam blog '*From Poverty To Power*'⁸.

An international conference, '*Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy*' was held in May 2013⁹. The conference focused on how SSE can contribute to local development, food security, gender equality, environmental protection and health care provisioning. It attracted 300 participants from 35 countries representing a wide range of sectors including the UN development community, academia, SSE practitioners, NGOs and civil society representatives. Participants included UN staff from ILO, FAO, UNDP, UN Women, UNCTAD, World Bank, UNECE. UN staff were also speakers and session chairs.

SSE is an area in which UNRISD has worked closely with other UN agencies. For example, the 2013 conference was organized in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service. During the conference representatives of international organizations convened separately and discussed the idea of an Interagency Task Force. The role of this task force was to place the topic of SSE more firmly on the UN agenda; act as a platform for exchanging experiences and learning about good practices; and possibly identify, design and

⁷ The final version of the ECOSOC Secretariat report is available at:

http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.5/2014/8

⁸ See <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/beyond-the-fringe-realizing-the-potential-of-social-and-solidarity-economy/>

⁹ See

<http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BD6AB/%28httpEvents%29/513E84D6BA2D56EEC1257AFA00469157?OpenDocument&category=Conference+Papers+and+Outputs>

undertake collaborative projects. Building on the momentum generated by the conference, UNRISD worked with the ILO, UNDP Geneva Representation Office and UN-NGLS to set up an UN Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE¹⁰.

The founding meeting of the UN Task Force took place on 30 September 2013 in Geneva. A large number of UN agencies: FAO, TDR (the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases), UNAIDS, UN-DESA, UNESCO, UNEP, UNIDO, UN Women, WFP and WHO participated in the meeting. 17 organisations are now signed up to work together as part of the Task Force including UN agencies regional commissions and the OECD¹¹. Three umbrella associations of international social and solidarity economy networks joined the Task Force as observers. The Task Force aims to pursue joint initiatives among members, including producing reports and briefs and organizing events related to SSE in connection with relevant UN processes and conferences. UNRISD is acting as the secretariat for the Task Force during its first 6 months.

Case study 3 - Shaping the agenda (Oxfam/care)

This case study looks at a recent example of the impact of UNRISD's work, in particular the gender and development programme, on the social development agenda. In 2013 Oxfam produced a background paper entitled '*Care in households and communities: background paper on conceptual issues*'.¹² The report is a prerequisite for developing Oxfam's care agenda and brings together conceptual issues and debates from a range of international NGOs and UN agencies. It contains a number of specific references to UNRISD research publications.

There are 16 references made to UNRISD and UNRISD-related work in the Oxfam report, out of 107 listed in the bibliography. References to UNRISD include its work around issues of gender inequalities around provision of paid and unpaid care and a call for a redistribution of care responsibilities; understandings of care in terms of definitions, allocation of care responsibilities amongst different welfare channels, and lowly paid employment in care work; measuring care in the context of monetary value comparisons between unpaid care services and care services provided by the public sector. For example, the section entitled: '*Different understandings of care shape different care agendas*' includes a number of references to UNRISD's work in challenging conventional understanding of the term 'care'.

UNRISD is keen to reframe agendas to support social development. Oxfam is influential in shaping the policy agenda and these background references demonstrate how UNRISD's work in developing concepts and debates around care in specific domains has influenced the Oxfam report.

Conclusions on impact case studies

These three brief case studies are intended to illustrate the range of processes and settings in which

¹⁰ See

[http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/newsview.nsf/\(httpNews\)/D383EB2BF07FF084C1257BFA00420698?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/newsview.nsf/(httpNews)/D383EB2BF07FF084C1257BFA00420698?OpenDocument)

¹¹ For latest membership and details see <http://www.unrisd.org/tfsse>

¹² **Innovations in Care** project page, toolkit and background paper: www.oxfam.org.uk/care.

impact occurs from UNRISD's work. The resources available for the evaluation mean these are largely descriptive rather than analytical accounts of the processes and factors affecting impact. However, the importance of UNRISD's location in the UN system; formal and informal direct contact and ongoing relationships between UNRISD staff and those in UN agencies and other organisations, UNRISD's reputation, communication activity and in-depth knowledge of social development research can all be seen to play a role in creating impact. A good sense of the breadth and volume of UNRISD's impact activity can be gained from the three case studies and the material in the following paragraphs. The standing it has with, and value it has for, various UN agencies working on social development issues can also be seen.

3.4 What role has UNRISD played in providing thought leadership within and external to the UN?

Research question 1: What role has UNRISD played in providing thought leadership and contributing research on important knowledge gaps, both within and external to the UN?

The evaluation has revealed clear and strong evidence of positive outcomes and impacts resulting from UNRISD's work.

UNRISD has been able to reframe and set policy agendas within the United Nations and at national levels; shine a light on important social policy areas where high-quality research is often thin on the ground; explore links between particular social policy topics and wider structural issues within the global economy; and bring the perspectives of researchers based in middle and low-income countries to the fore.

Evidence collected by UNRISD in its progress reports and other documents, and in particular the staff and stakeholder interviews, provided multiple examples of impacts. Our qualitative impression from interviews and survey responses is that UNRISD plays or has played a strong leadership role in multiple social development debates.

Impacts were observed in multiple research/policy areas including: gender and economy of care; social policy as development; social protection floors; transformative social policy; universalism; social dimensions of sustainable development, the green economy; corporate social responsibility and social and solidarity economy; poverty and inequality, finance and social policy. Further details of the impacts in each of these areas are given in full evaluation report.

Three broad types of impact from UNRISD work were identified in interviews:

- *Framing impacts*: particularly by changing the language, or boundaries of key social policy debates, with implications at both international and national/regional levels,
- *Direct impacts*: particularly through contributions to a wide range of UN policy documents and processes and by bringing research-based evidence to policy and expert fora at international, regional and national levels,
- *Indirect capacity-building impacts*: particularly by strengthening the voice of Southern research collaborators in national and regional policy processes and enhancing the

availability of high quality and locally generated research on social policy in middle and low-income countries.

It is important to note that many of these impacts may not be immediately apparent to those working outside the organisations or even processes concerned and UNRISD may often not be explicitly credited for the contributions and impacts it is responsible for. Impacts are often the result of UNRISD's involvement in ongoing processes with staff in UN agencies, both formal and informal, which individually may seem small or even inconsequential but collectively and over time result in much larger impacts.

3.5 How effectively has UNRISD managed risks and responded to changes in the external environment?

Research question 2: How effectively has UNRISD managed risks and responded to changes to the external environment (e.g. changes in funding)?

The most significant risk that UNRISD has faced in the period under evaluation is its financial sustainability. Resolving this issue is acknowledged as a major challenge by staff, stakeholders and donors alike. Addressing it is the third strategic objective in UNRISD's Institutional Strategy, alongside objectives focused on research, communications and outreach.

Objectively, the size and income of UNRISD have reduced over the evaluation period. This could be seen as an institutional failing. However, the alternative view is that the contraction in UNRISD's funding and consequent reduced staff numbers is the inevitable consequence of the post-2008 financial crisis and UNRISD has been very proactive in its efforts to secure income in a challenging economic environment.

Many respondents made suggestions for where funding might be secured in the short to long-term and six distinct approaches to diversifying and increasing the financial resources were suggested as being available to UNRISD:

- a) Increasing fundraising efforts with grant-making foundations – with views mixed on the value of focusing efforts in this area.
- b) Seeking new sources of funding from 'non-traditional' government donors within the development assistance community, including Brazil, India, China or South Korea – with interviewees highlighting the importance to such diversification of building long-term relationships in-country, and the risk of loss of independence associated with highly restricted funding.
- c) Enhanced collaboration with multi-institution partnerships within the international social development research community – an approach that seems to have significant potential if UNRISD can ensure that it is seen as a potential collaborator or partner by partial counterparts outside the UN.

- d) More effective communication to stakeholders and donors of UNRISD's organisational and functional niche, associated with increased visibility within the UN and wider development research community.
- e) Efforts to establish an endowment – an approach that appeared as desirable but might not be feasible in the current funding environment.
- f) Bringing together a group of potentially supportive donors with a view to seeking collective commitment over a period of time around a clearly defined, impact and outcome-oriented agenda – an approach that chimes well with UNRISD's existing plans to convene a major donor meeting.

However, as is to be expected, none of these are immediate panaceas, or offer options that UNRISD would not already be aware of or already exploring. Furthermore, they all require investment of scarce staff resources typically on a medium to long-term basis, with no guarantee that they would secure funding.

Given these observations about financial sustainability what can one conclude about the effectiveness of UNRISD's management of risks?

Separating risks, management and outcomes

In assessing an organisation's management of risk and its effectiveness care needs to be taken to consider separately the process of identification of risks, the responses and actions made to risks identified and the outcomes these responses result in. Have risks been identified, are appropriate and proportionate strategies and systems in place for dealing with them should they occur and when they have occurred were the systems in place adequate?

From consideration of documents, and interviews with staff and stakeholders, many of whom have worked with UNRISD as partners, staff or board members, UNRISD is a well-managed organisation with effective systems in place for developing and implementing its strategy and reporting on its achievements. Weaknesses identified in previous evaluations have been addressed through the investment of staff time and resources to develop internal systems assisted by the input of significant pieces of externally commissioned advice conducted collaboratively on key issues such as fundraising and communications.

UNRISD does not currently have a formal institutional risk management strategy. Staff with whom we discussed this issue explicitly indicated they felt the size of the organisation did not warrant the investment of time in one. However, discussions also revealed a keen awareness of the challenges facing the organisation and the internal and external factors that may get in the way of delivering its objectives. These issues are apparent in institutional documents and reporting. Beyond the financial challenge facing UNRISD, other risks considered important to manage by UNRISD staff include the small size of the organisation and the consequent challenge of adapting to or managing shocks at a time of financial pressure; continuity of staffing and management of institutional memory; and the reputational risks associated with inappropriate public positioning or from poor quality research. One further risk that emerged from the interviews is that at least some of UNRISD's potential to address its present funding challenges is not being realised because it is not seen as a potential

partner or collaborator by its partial counterparts outside the UN. We return to this point in our recommendations.

It was evident from our interviews that UNRISD seeks to take a medium to long-term perspective when setting its research priorities. What is less clear is whether this long-term perspective consistently serves to enhance UNRISD's impact within the United Nations system; particularly when it comes to clearly mandate-driven organisations. For while there is value in a pluralistic UN; no necessary first mover advantage accrues to those who are ahead of the pack. This positively perceived ability to be ahead of the pack also presents one of UNRISD's biggest challenges when it comes to fundraising. We also identified real concerns, shared by a number of interviewees, that the cutting edge of UNRISD's cutting-edge role could be dulled by increased pressures to shape its research to be responsive to donor needs. Generally UNRISD has resisted these pressures. But there is a price to pay in terms of its ability to secure financial resources. A shift from core to programmatic funding rather than project funding is one response to this tension allowing flexibility of operation within broader programme themes.

How well has UNRISD managed risks?

As evaluators, and on the basis of the evidence we have gathered from multiple sources, we conclude that there is little more that UNRISD could have done over the evaluation period to improve its financial sustainability, given the significant limitations of internal resources and external operating constraints.

External constraints have included uncertainty created by UN reform processes. Significantly, they also include shifting donor priorities; with bilateral development cooperation agencies increasingly preferring programme or project funding rather than core funding; and a shift to a greater emphasis on direct funding of Southern organisations. Together with changes in donor governments' policy and political priorities and the post-2008 financial crisis, these factors have all combined to present a very unfavourable funding environment.

Conclusions on funding

There are some signs that UNRISD's funding situation may now be improving, with a series of new donor agreements secured in late 2013 and early 2014. However, both the overall and UNRISD's specific funding environments remain challenging and interview and survey respondents identified a lack of resources as a limiting factor for UNRISD. UNRISD needs to do more work if it is to secure its long-term financial sustainability. UNRISD is only too aware of this through its own experience and the insights from the DUCI work on UNRISD fundraising (Daryl Upsall Consulting International, 2012). The critical issue is how short and medium-term certainty can be created to allow a focus on securing longer-term options. We make some further observations below and make suggestions in our recommendations on the actions UNRISD could take to address the funding challenge.

In addition to changes in the overall external funding environment, other factors also call for UNRISD to evolve and adapt its approach to fundraising. Social development issues have, over the past fifty years, been integrated far more significantly within the work of other multilateral organisations and research institutes. Social development research is now a highly competitive arena with many more organisations seeking both to conduct research and influence the UN system. On the basis of its

unique role UNRISD needs both to distinguish itself from and promote partnerships with other partial international counterparts outside the UN system working in social development research. While much work has been done on communications, outreach and branding, more can and needs to be done to clarify UNRISD's niche and role to distinguish it from other organisations, in particular for donors to understand UNRISD's role. Framing UNRISD's work to highlight how it can add value and impact to donors' other investments, e.g. to those in Southern organisations, is likely to be necessary.

There is also a need to consider how UNRISD could frame at least some of its work programme to appeal to, as some interviewees expressed it, 'beyond the converted' and reach out to possible target audiences or donors with different disciplinary or paradigmatic perspectives on social development (although it should also be noted that some examples of UNRISD already doing this were highlighted by respondents).

While there are many funding options that could be pursued we would concur with the approach proposed in the DUCI funding strategy (Daryl Upsall Consulting International, 2012) and the analysis rationale supporting it. As such UNRISD should continue to balancing pursuit of core and programmatic funding and prioritising re-engaging existing and past funders in the short-term and start developing relationship with European and US foundations with an eye on medium to longer-term options.

3.6 Does UNRISD provide Value for Money?

Research Question 3: To what extent did UNRISD performance and delivery provide Value for Money?

Our consideration of Value for Money (VfM) has been conceptually underpinned by the approach outlined in the UK National Audit Office's Analytical Framework for Assessing Value for Money (National Audit Office, nd). This is a process-based, and not necessarily quantitative, approach to Value for Money which has a planning phase and an assessment phase. The planning phase considers the outcomes desired, the resources required and performance criteria for success. The assessment phases consider the performance achieved and the resources used compared to prior expectations, both internal and external to the organisation, to draw conclusions on whether the activity represented value for money and how better value could be delivered in the future. As such, in the evaluation we looked for evidence of UNRISD's use of planning processes around setting of objectives and performance measures/criteria, and consideration of resource allocation, along with review processes to assess performance and actual use of resources. In particular we were interested in the process used to capture and act on learning from delivery of activities as a key aspect of value for money. Evidence was drawn on these themes from the range of methodologies used in the evaluation but in particular the staff interviews and documentary analysis.

In general terms, as already noted, UNRISD is highly productive. Based on documentary analysis, interviews with staff and stakeholders there is clear evidence of a large volume of outputs and impacts that have been generated with a relatively small level of expenditure. UNRISD also has good management and governance systems in place. The production of good quality and detailed strategies, annual reports, board papers, and UNRISD's Results-Based Management system all point to an organisation that is capable of effective delivery and providing Value for Money. The elements

of objective-setting, performance measures, resource allocation and review processes are all in place.

Interviews confirmed stakeholders' perception of value for money, but with a tendency to focus on the value of UNRISD rather than financial and other resources required to deliver that value. Use of resources available was considered to be efficient and effective by stakeholders. UNRISD's institutional capability and the very considerable body of work that it has conducted over the years, together with its extensive and unique networks, represent embedded resources that donors can draw on – and that would be very hard to recreate from scratch.

More specifically; UNRISD's communications team invests significant time implementing the organisation's Results-Based Management system. This links the management system and the deployment of resources (human and financial) to enhance performance in relation to measured results.

UNRISD is clearly committed to applying its Results-Based Management system professionally and diligently and to using it for monitoring, evaluation and reporting. This sits well with the concept of value for money we have articulated above and also demonstrates value for money through UNRISD being responsive to donor feedback and requests. However, one observation we would make as evaluators is that more 'learning-based' deployment of resources to enhance results on a year-on-year basis could be useful. This is not to say that learning is not derived from delivery, but rather that a lot of UNRISD's learning remains tacit and is not explicitly shared across the staff team. We acknowledge and were told by staff that the recent financial challenges have made it hard, or even a luxury, to allocate time to reflect on and document lessons from successes and failures and develop systems to do this. This said a greater effort could be made by UNRISD staff to explicitly reflect on insights gained from its ways of working; for example the way projects are approached or events are planned; to ensure that they explicitly contribute to UNRISD objectives and are continually delivered in more effective ways. This is not to say UNRISD activities are not delivering value for money, far from it, but rather that developing an institutional culture that more explicitly questions how things are done, whether they could they be done differently or better, and links activities to delivery of mandate, could reap rewards, even with a few relatively small changes.

The Communications and Outreach team has already developed and adopted a range of new methods and approaches and to a degree the outstanding challenge lies more with the research staff. We got a keen sense of the intellectual capabilities and knowledge of the research staff but felt that opportunities existed for delivering further innovation in the *practice* of research and not just its content. For example there are opportunities, given the revolution in information technologies and services, to work in different ways and conduct projects and knowledge transfer activities that operate at different paces, for example ranging from using Twitter to engage in social development debate and network building, to commentary pieces on blogs, to review papers, to longer-term original research projects.

3.7 How can UNRISD strengthen quality and relevance of its research, enhance impacts and boost value for money?

Research Question 4: What are key insights on how UNRISD may strengthen quality and relevance of research, enhance impacts and boost value for money?

Drawing on our earlier conclusions, we comment further on this research question below. The key and obvious point is that a secure funding basis for UNRISD is an imperative for delivery of its objectives and ongoing success. We offered initial conclusions on these issues above in the section on Research Question 2 on management of risks. Beyond this we draw the following additional conclusions:

Explicitly embedding quality

While UNRISD is widely valued for the high quality of its research, we consider that, given its central importance to the work of UNRISD, quality could be made a more explicit feature of research and outputs processes to ensure all staff are dealing with it in a consistent and effective way. This need not be made into a bureaucratic process. Rather, for example, consideration of quality could be a feature of regular staff meetings, with quality issues discussed as a team to share and develop approaches; or through a more explicit recording in outputs of quality-related issues such as methods used and the reliability of and confidence in findings. A focus on how different users view quality (e.g. as 'rigour', 'novelty', or 'timeliness') could also be used to ensure outputs are relevant to users' needs.

Value for Money

In section 3.6 we concluded that UNRISD provides value for money in terms of the quantity and quality of its outputs and the overall systems of management in place to deliver value for money.

However, we consider that a more explicit approach to value for money could be developed. Again this is not about bureaucratic processes and 'bean counting' but instead about seeing value for money as a learning process and about doing things better. This involves creating an organisational culture that creatively links objective-setting to resource allocation; knows what success looks like; and then draws lessons from delivery to feed back into future work. This requires some organisational space to achieve and is hard to do in a period of financial uncertainty but even small changes in mindset from, for example, moving from 'this is how we do things' to 'how could we do things better?' may generate benefits.

Communications and Outreach

UNRISD has made a significant investment in Communication and Outreach activity over the course of the evaluation period and this has generated some notable successes. We consider that UNRISD should continue to focus on developing clear communications resources across all relevant media on the role, niche and funding of UNRISD is now indispensable to further progress. All staff need to be engaged in the delivery of these communications resources, with every opportunity taken to remind UNRISD's target audiences and stakeholders of these three core features of UNRISD's 'institutional DNA'. Publications, events, meetings (small and large) and web-based and social media activity all offer opportunities to build shared and wider understanding of what UNRISD is and how it works.

We observed some missed opportunities to do this during the evaluation, for example at public events. This is a responsibility of both research and communications staff.

There are also opportunities to more closely integrate research and communications activity. For example, we were struck by the lack of tweeting done by UNRISD researchers at its events compared to other research and policy-based organisations networks we are familiar with. While it has largely focused on UK-based research and policy networks our experience is that Twitter can help to expand research and opinion-former networks, open up conversations to new entrants, 'spread the word' about important findings, and even on occasion generate substantial new areas of discussion. A rapid review of Twitter coverage of social science-related questions and debates is, we believe, an increasingly useful element in policy-oriented research processes. As individuals, we believe it would be helpful for UNRISD staff to be more active and visible on Twitter across the range of languages in which they are able to work.

We are conscious of the limitations of access to reliable and high-speed IT networks in parts of the Global South and realise that care should be taken in recommending adopting communications approaches that may not be easily available across the UNRISD network. We are also conscious of staff time constraints. However, we feel there would be value in all UNRISD researchers taking greater responsibility for communications beyond research and project-based activity, and also giving consideration to what new communications opportunities and information services mean for the conduct and communication of research.

User engagement, knowledge transfer activities and responsive research

A number of calls were made in the interviews for greater engagement with UNRISD, both from those within the UN system and wider research networks. The capacity of UNRISD to engage with users of its research is obviously limited by available resources and needs to be balanced against ensuring resources, time and space for conducting research and individual requests for engagement judged against their fit with institutional objectives and strategy. Given the fact that many engagement and consultative activities are not remunerated, core funding is an important enabler of this activity.

However, we think there may be value in UNRISD exploring the functional split of staff responsibilities for engagement with users in the UN system and opportunities for formally and informally engaging them. Sarah Cook is currently largely responsible for the engagement with UN users. This function could be more evenly divided over the research team, although care is needed to ensure researchers are not distracted from their primary function of conducting research.

There may also be a case for a more explicit policy-led rather than research-led workstream (i.e. shaped by policymakers' current priorities) based on knowledge transfer activities and/or the conduct of more reactive research. This would be complementary to UNRISD's existing research activities and involve knowledge transfer activities and research activity explicitly directed at engaging policymakers in their current agendas of interest, identifying how existing research is relevant, identifying policy knowledge gaps and how links to the medium to long-term focus of much of UNRISD's work can be made.

Having a policy-led work stream could offer a way of engaging research users ‘beyond the converted’ on the agendas they are interested in and co-producing new research agendas and projects to bring them more closely into wider social development debates convened by UNRISD. It may also offer a way to demonstrate more immediate benefits to donors of UNRISD activity and be faster paced work compared to the more formal research activities already conducted by UNRISD.

These policy-led activities could also be designed to reflect the interactive system-based approach that Best and Holmes (2010) suggest is characteristic of the most advanced knowledge-to-action organisations where the challenge is ‘a problem of production, suggesting a need for researchers and practitioners or decision makers to collaborate, co-producing knowledge about complex problems’ (p149, Best and Holmes, 2010). We return to this issue in section 3.8.

UNRISD has clearly developed its communications network and the Communications Strategy (UNRISD, 2012b) presents a detailed and structured approach to development of the communications and outreach. Target audiences are identified in this strategy and we have received information from UNRISD staff as to how new groups of stakeholders and audiences are identified and brought into UNRISD’s network: for example, calls for papers / expressions of interest, contracting/commissioning work, use of internet and other digital channels to carry out searches and identify experts across policy, donor, academic and advocacy audiences. We were initially less clear on the degree to which different audiences receive different types or frequency of communications; and how core audiences are targeted for more active engagement rather than just communications activity by UNRISD but received additional information from UNRISD indicating differentiation occurs with the “stakeholder network” and “interested target audience” groups for projects/themes as well as general communications and outreach activity. We would highlight the importance of periodic review of the composition of stakeholder networks to ensure key audiences, organisations and individuals are appropriately represented. Consideration should also be given to systems for ensuring contact details from all staff interactions with external stakeholders are collated and ensuring core audiences are regularly communicated with and engaged with as appropriate.

3.8 Insights from the Evaluation’s Conceptual Model

In section 1.4 we highlighted the importance of underpinning research impact evaluation activities with an explicit conceptual model of the relationship between research, knowledge and, policy. In this section we revisit this conceptual model to consider the insights it gives for the evaluation and future activity of UNRISD. As the earlier section noted, the conceptual model we have used for this evaluation is the model of thinking about how to bridge evidence and policy/practice – or knowledge to action – proposed by Best and Holmes (2010). This approach outlines three phases of development in an organisation’s approach to knowledge transfer and promotion of research impact. These are: linear models, relationship models and systems models. (See section 1.4 for details.)

UNRISD's development as a knowledge transfer organisation

UNRISD has made much progress in recent years in its approach to knowledge-to-action, moving from a simple linear dissemination model to a networked-based approach. We have found clear evidence of this in UNRISD systems of communications and outreach and the approach and data of the Results-Based Management system. The evaluation also confirms our initial view of UNRISD as an organisation operating in a domain exhibiting the characteristics associated with the third generation of knowledge transfer. That is to say UNRISD operates in complex, evolving, interactive system of many actors whose knowledge needs inform one another's relationships and activities.

Challenges for organisations involved in knowledge generation and transfer

While the overarching framework and key characteristics of each stage of the conceptual model were helpful in developing our approach and research tools, at the analysis stage it was initially less clear how the evaluation findings and conceptual model could be used to assess the extent to which the 'third generation', whole systems approach had been embedded within the organisation and what this means for the UNRISD's future activity. We have got a strong sense of UNRISD as a knowledge generating and managing organisation employing third generation approaches but were less clear how we would evidence this – issues like leadership, culture, organisational reflexivity and learning practices are less easy to assess using the data we have.

We have further reflected upon this as an evaluation team, including engaging in personnel correspondence with Allan Best, one of the proposers of three stage model we have used. This has developed our thinking in this area and we would offer the following observations and conclusions in regard to the conceptual model as used in the evaluation and the insights for UNRISD.

- The recent and ongoing revolution in information technologies and services has created opportunities for both the more effective delivery of traditional ways of working along with entirely new ways of working, for both organisations and individuals.
- These enhanced and new ways of working are rapidly and continually evolving in multiple domains including at the interface of research, knowledge and policy. Dissemination, communication and networking possibilities are vastly enhanced in speed, reach and potential rates of uptake along with new modes of conducting research and knowledge transfer.
- The imperative of creating and demonstrating impact from research activity and not just knowledge generation provides a clear focus for evolving knowledge management and transfer activity.

This rapidly evolving landscape means we are at a cusp of change between new and old models of research and knowledge transfer. This is not to suggest 'old' models are redundant, far from it. As the Best and Holmes model suggests there is a need for organisations to continue to undertake dissemination and networking activity to achieve knowledge transfer. However, to move to a third generation approach to knowledge transfer requires more than just a transfer of traditional methods to delivery by web-based information technologies and services. A more explicit reflection on how an organisation sits in a complex and evolving system of knowledge generators and users is needed.

There are some interesting examples we are aware of groups trying to get to grips with this challenge. One example we would highlight is *The Impact Blog* at the London School of Economics which:

*“...is a hub for researchers, administrative staff, librarians, students, think-tanks, government, and anyone else interested in maximising the impact of academic work in the social sciences and other disciplines.”*¹³

The *Impact Blog* provides a space to encourage debate, share best practice and provide the impact community with the latest resources and developments in the area of research impact and the social science of knowledge mobilisation. This initiative is relatively new but has grown rapidly in size and profile. It has utilised a mixture of research, dissemination, communication and networking activity (both traditional and social media methods) in the context of a keen awareness of the evolving nature of the research/policy system they are part of and the evidence needs of this. As such we would cite them as an example of the third generation knowledge transfer approach and urge UNRISD to consider it and other similar organisations in more detail to draw lessons from.

Implications and challenges for UNRISD emerging from the evaluations conceptual model

We have explored the conceptual model underpinning the evaluation and its implications for knowledge generation and transfer in some detail as we believe it may hold the key to unlocking at least some of the challenges UNRISD faces.

In recent years there has been a shift towards a greater emphasis on creating impact from research activity. This is reflected in donor priorities for research funding. UNRISD's priority focus is on the development and delivery of a research and content-led agenda which is intended to lead to impacts. There is a good deal of overlap between these two framings but the differences in emphasis are important. They need to be resolved as they may be a barrier to donors supporting UNRISD if they feel it does not deliver quite what they want. UNRISD has been closing this gap over the evaluation period with the development of its communications and outreach work. However, the question remains about how the gap between donor and UNRISD framing of priorities can be closed and the also the degree to which it should be closed. This tension could be usefully explored using the Best and Holmes framework or other conceptual models of the relationship between research, knowledge and policy.

Framing UNRISD's research agenda/content as well as research communication and outreach systems in the context of the complex system we have described could be used to better link UNRISD and donor priorities and as the basis of developing a new research strategy to follow the current 2011-2014 one.

Put simply, we would suggest that UNRISD's next institutional research strategy should not just be proposing more research to address social development challenges with ever-improved

¹³ For details of *The Impact Blog* at the London School of Economics see <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>

communication and outreach activity to lead to uptake and impact. Instead it should also be based on a more complex understanding of the research/knowledge/policy system UNRISD is part of, a segmentation of the needs of actors in that system, the activities it conducts and opportunities of developing information systems and technologies. This could get past the oft-quoted simplistic observation that policymakers only ever want two page summaries of research and acknowledge their needs are variable and may sometimes be for short summaries and other time much more substantive insights.

As such there are some important questions which UNRISD and donors to address and answer:

- How should UNRISD best structure its research and impact activities to reflect the changing landscape for the conduct of policy-relevant research and knowledge transfer?
- Will greater impact flow from UNRISD's research through ever improved communication and outreach of its work?
- And/or is a reconfiguration of at least some of its modes of operation necessary to enable greater uptake, impact and delivery of other donor priorities?
- If reconfiguration is necessary what is the form or approach to research, substantive focus of its and types of output required?

In this context a proportion of the current UNRISD communications and outreach work could be adapted or reframed as a knowledge-to-action workstream. Consideration would need to be given to the additional skills that would be required for this role to be successfully delivered and, while it could be researcher-led, knowledge transfer is becoming a discipline in its own right requiring a knowledge of research, policy and communications processes, expertise in identifying, appraising and synthesising evidence and skills to engage effectively with users (see, for example, Knight and Lightowler, 2010).

As we have stated we gained a strong sense of UNRISD operating as a third generation knowledge management and transfer organisation and on reflection feel this may be based on the staff's intuitive understanding of the complexities of the social development research and policy debate in the UN system and beyond. We believe there is value for UNRISD and donors in making it a more explicit approach and return to this issue in our recommendations.

3.9 UNRISD's progress since previous evaluations

In drawing conclusions about the performance and impact of UNRISD over the evaluation period (April 2008 – March 2013) it is useful to revisit the findings and recommendations of the previous evaluations to consider the longer term context and trends. What progress has been made during the evaluation period to address issues and challenges identified in previous evaluations? Which ones remain and have new challenges arisen in the meantime? We consider these issues briefly below before moving onto our recommendations in the next section.

The last major evaluation of UNRISD was the Sida-funded *Too Good to be True?* (Nayyar et al, 2006) which considered the period 1996-2005. Since then a Mid-term Review has taken place (Mathiason

and Arora, 2012). Many of the conclusions of the previous full evaluation are echoed in our findings and conclusions as these quotes from Nayyar et al (2006) indicate:

“Its autonomy is an asset. Its independence is a real strength. It is a valuable bridge between the United Nations system and the academic world. It has provided important inputs for UN Summits and Conferences...”, p66,

“Its range and number of publications are impressive.”, p66, ,

“UNRISD is cost effective. Its research provides good value for money.”, p69.

But familiar challenges are noted as well:

“Its finances, which are neither stable nor predictable are a cause for concern. The magnitude of finances is not adequate. The nature of finances is not appropriate.”, p66,

“...but UNRISD is perhaps too small. Its cottage-industry scale inevitably constrains performance.”, p66,

“UNRISD is not known enough in the outside world. And even where UNRISD is known, its work is not sufficiently recognized.”, p66.

The 2006 Sida evaluation considered UNRISD to have produced a large volume of high-quality, relevant research with limited resources. UNRISD was considered to have been responsive to issues raised in earlier evaluations, and have a good model of operation, based on conferences to generate new ideas and research themes and a network of scholars for delivering research. The fundamental criticism made of UNRISD in the Sida evaluation was in regard to UNRISD’s dissemination activities. Further criticisms were made in relation to the transparency and inclusivity of the UNRISD network and its choice of programmes, themes, projects and authors, *“The insiders are happy. The outsiders are not”*, (p69, Nayyar et al, 2006) and its personnel policies were “almost dysfunctional” (p66, Nayyar et al, 2006).

The main recommendations made in the Sida evaluation were for the need to: rethink UNRISD’s strategy for dissemination; address the problem of its finances as a priority and to increase the size of the organisation over time, with a doubling of professional staff from the then eight. The importance of the maintaining the niche UNRISD occupies, its autonomous nature within the UN systems, and a high proportion of core funding (at least two thirds if not three quarters of total income) were also highlighted as being essential. The strengths and weaknesses identified in the Sida evaluation were noted as not being altogether new.

Following the appointment of Sarah Cook as UNRISD director in November 2009 a new institutional strategy was published in March 2011 (UNRISD 2011a) to run to 2014. The 2011 institutional strategy clearly developed strategic responses to address the concerns raised in the Sida evaluation, notably around communications and outreach and the transparency and inclusiveness of the UNRISD network. External consultants were also commissioned to advise UNRISD on its approaches

to communications (see Gaught Conlon and Associates Ltd (2011) and fundraising (see Daryl Upsall Consulting International (2012) both of which note strengths and challenges for UNRISD.

A Mid-term Review of UNRISD was published in 2012 (Mathiason and Arora, 2012). The Mid-term Review concluded that the first two objectives of the institutional strategy – in essence, first, to conduct innovative research to address contemporary social development problems and second, to ensure the use of the research in the UN system, donor community, academia and civil society were well on the way to achievement. The third objective, to secure long-term financial sustainability was considered increasingly problematic.

The clear message that can be taken from the longer term view of UNRISD's performance is that it is a highly productive organisation that delivers high quality research and new perspectives on social development. It brings this research and relevant stakeholders together into the UN system and wider research and civil society communities and fora. UNRISD is valued for the work it does and seen to play a unique role. It has been responsive to the recommendations of recent evaluations and donor requests and has been successful at delivering outputs and outcomes it has control over.

As such UNRISD would seem to be an eminently fundable body. Yet, over many years it has struggled, and continues to struggle, to find a stable and sufficiently high level of funding to support its work. Recent external developments: the global financial crisis; shifting donor priorities to activities with more immediate impacts; a preference to give funding to organisations based in the Global South and a move from centre-left to centre-right government in possible funders countries in Northern Europe have all created a challenging funding environment. These challenges should not be understated but they are ones UNRISD can do little to control. It instead should focus on the factors it can control – the value-added of its research and network, communicating its unique institutional position, building relationships with funders and so on and this has been the basis of the fund raising approaches. The issue of funding is, of course, not new but it does seem that if not successfully resolved in the short to medium term it potentially calls into the question the continued existence of UNRISD. In the next section we make recommendations intended to resolve this crucial issue.

4. Recommendations

Our overall conclusion is that UNRISD has a good story to tell on what it has achieved in the evaluation period. It is a valued and productive organisation producing high-quality agenda-setting research, and occupies a unique position both in the UN system and in the global social development community. Over the evaluation period UNRISD can demonstrate many significant impacts resulting from its research, communications and outreach activity in the UN system and wider network.

Over the evaluation period UNRISD has operated under some very significant constraints, the most important being financial stability and security. These constraints have at best limited the quantity of work UNRISD has been able to do, and at worst, called into question the future existence of the organisation, at least in its current form. UNRISD has responded as best it can to an external environment it could do little to control. It has weathered what appears to be the worst of the storm in regard to funding.

However, there are still challenges UNRISD needs to address if it is to deliver its mandate more effectively and move towards a position of greater financial security. The conclusions we have drawn in the evaluation and recommendations we make about various aspects of UNRISD's work and operation should not be taken to indicate that we believe there have been significant failings of the organisation over the evaluation period. In fact we hope they will demonstrate the opposite: that aside from the challenge of funding, which is not to be downplayed, UNRISD is making a fundamentally important contribution to social development research and policy with a relatively small investment of resources.

The focus of the recommendations is therefore on securing UNRISD's contribution to UN policy development and global social development research. The recommendations are made in the context of a rapidly developing interface between research, knowledge and policy and the impact of fast changing information technologies and services on the delivery of research, uptake and impact. These issues will need to be considered and built into the next UNRISD institutional strategy. There are also recommendations that can and will need to be addressed in the short term in order to provide a foundation for the development of an approach that allows longer-term financial stability, and ongoing effectiveness and value for money.

UNRISD's niche and responding to the changing context of its work

As an independent research institute; UNRISD has neither an allocation from the UN's regular budget nor an endowment or trust fund. A consideration of previous evaluations has highlighted financial issues have been longstanding, although the post-2008 financial crisis has exacerbated these. Funding constraints are among the factors that have in practice placed obstacles in the way of realising the vision of its founders throughout UNRISD's history.

At the same time social issues have, over the past fifty years, been integrated far more significantly within the work of other multilateral organisations and research institutes. Whilst UNRISD has itself played more than a small part in this gradual process of change, one result is that the overall competitive environment for UNRISD's work has become more crowded. On this basis alone UNRISD must reassert and more clearly articulate and communicate the unique niche it occupies.

UNRISD's Geneva base is now both an advantage and a disadvantage. For while it gives UNRISD ready access to a range of Geneva-based UN institutions and key international actors, this – no matter the deep internationalism of the United Nations and its family of institutions – can also be perceived as making it a 'Northern' organisation, with the implication that it is less attuned to the needs of non-OECD government policymakers. In turn, this may also make it more challenging for UNRISD to raise funds from government donors in middle or low-income countries.

The value, in the crowded marketplace of ideas, of UNRISD's ability to apply the visual and institutional identity of the United Nations to its activities and outputs has also shifted over time. UNRISD's unique role is closely connected to its identity within the United Nations. This can both enhance its credibility and strengthen its ability to impact on social development debates. Against this, however, must be set a sense among many stakeholders that the UN's brand overall has diminished value.

With these tensions actively in play, UNRISD cannot take the competitive value of its UN brand for granted, whether for influencing or fundraising purposes, when defining and communicating its niche. While UNRISD can justifiably be proud of its achievements over the last fifty years and should build on them, it also needs to look to the future not the past, more clearly acknowledge the changing external environment and respond to it. Today, UNRISD needs to make sense, as an international social development research institute, independently of the strong case for an agency like it to exist within the UN.

A theme that has cut through the evaluation is how UNRISD should relate to its 'competitors' working in the domain of social development policy and research. This use of the term competitors was often objected to or qualified in discussions with UNRISD staff and stakeholders as not being appropriate given UNRISD's unique role and location. This is to miss the point. While there are not direct competitors to UNRISD in role and location there are a range of organisations which are effectively competing for some, if not all, of the territory UNRISD operates in, whether defined in terms of, for example, the attention of policymakers both internationally and nationally, funding from donors, or development of partnerships in the Global South and so on.

Institutionally UNRISD has a clear sense of the role it plays in the UN system on social development research and policy and this is articulated in its strategic documents. However, it is vital that UNRISD effectively articulates its niche to stakeholders and demonstrates how it adds value to social development policy and research in the UN system and more widely. This process of reassertion of its niche can also be used to redefine relationships currently seen as in some way competitive, to instead being potentially collaborative partnerships based on partners' respective functional and institutional strengths, for example, with other social development research bodies.

These suggestions that UNRISD's niche be more clearly stated should not, however, be implemented at the expense of UNRISD's ability to take a broad or systemic view of social issues – an institutional feature which has also emerged as a key strength.

Recommendation 1: UNRISD should continue to work to communicate its niche to more effectively articulate and distinguish the unique role it plays in social development policy and research. This needs to combine aspects of its UN setting and relationships; the strength of its networks in the Global South; and the role it plays in linking these networks to the UN and wider social development research and debates.

Strategic reflection of UNRISD's niche

UNRISD's strategic themes will need to be clearly aligned with its niche; to offer a tightly focused strategic direction while allowing room for opportunistic, quick-turnaround briefings and policy responses to rapidly evolving agendas utilising more policy-led knowledge transfer and reactive research activities. The systems-based conceptualisation of the relationship between research, knowledge and policy discussed in section 3.8 may have a useful role to play in developing this.

On the basis of stakeholder interviews and discussions with UNRISD staff we were impressed by what we learned about UNRISD's efforts to engage Southern researchers at the design stage of the research process rather than simply after the project idea has been developed. This has the potential to transform the research process itself. More effective communication of this core quality of research that is 'co-created' with Southern partners – itself at the heart of UNRISD's implicit 'theory of change' – could be invaluable in defining the organisation's central niche and therefore to communicating more effectively with external stakeholders and funders.

We commend to UNRISD for further consideration the suggestion of one researcher-interviewee that the value of UNRISD's work with Southern researchers might be enhanced, and institutional research capacity in the Global South strengthened, if relationships could be more closely tied to networks of researchers rather than to individuals.

Engagement with Southern stakeholders potentially offers a major justification for donors to support the institution. We were also convinced by evidence from our interviews that this approach generates substantial, and apparently currently under-reported, positive impacts, including by strengthening both the credibility and knowledge of researchers associated with UNRISD-coordinated research projects, and consequently their access to and influence on policy spaces at national and regional levels.

As such we would like to see UNRISD's engagement with Southern researchers, and the associated benefits of its way of working in terms of capacity-building and impact, become more clearly and directly integrated within a strengthened articulation of UNRISD's role and niche by adoption as a cross-cutting theme; fully integrated within UNRISD's communications strategy, and subsequently more widely recognised externally as a core attribute.

Communications and outreach

Over the evaluation period a shift from 'publication and dissemination' to 'communications and outreach' has occurred and use of web-based and social media has hugely expanded. Developing more effective communications approaches has been an important institutional priority.

While UNRISD's outreach and communications activities have considerably improved over the evaluation period, and at a time of diminishing income, there is still room to enhance UNRISD's visibility without incurring substantial additional costs. Two broad areas merit continued and further

action: firstly, the form and communication of UNRISD-generated content and secondly, communication of messages about the role, niche and funding of UNRISD. Clarifying the latter is indispensable to building the case for funding of UNRISD and should be a responsibility of all staff at UNRISD, not just those in the communications team. Misperceptions of the role and funding basis of UNRISD may significantly limit UNRISD's success in fundraising.

In particular, UNRISD could:

- Further strengthen dissemination links through existing audiences and counterparts within the UN system and with a network of national-level partners, who together can help to enhance UNRISD's outreach activities without further cost.
- More clearly identify, prioritise and target key users of its research in the UN system and consider the nature of communication or engagement activity that general and much narrower core audiences require.
- Consider additional translation of key materials (including through subtitles) into significant regional languages including Spanish, Arabic and Russian.
- Maintain the policy brief series, whilst considering ways to give the briefs a more distinctive 'UNRISD' visibility. Currently the visual identity of briefings from, for example, UNRISD, IDS, ODI and IIED (to compare with three UK-based institutes) is strikingly similar.

The possibilities and opportunities of more closely integrating research and communications activity and functions should be explored particularly around the use of social media by researchers to effectively communicate and engage with research and user networks.

Recommendation 2: UNRISD should continue to develop its approach to communications and outreach giving particular attention to existing core audiences in the UN system and its research networks but also national and regional-level partners and distinctive branding of its outputs.

Recommendation 3: Greater prominence must be given in all communications activity, whether publications, events, meetings, emails, telephone calls, web-based, social media etc. to clearly and succinctly articulating UNRISD's unique organisational niche, functional role and funding basis.

Recommendations 2 and 3 are for UNRISD to do more of what it is already doing as far as resources allow. Recommendation 3 overlaps with recommendation 1 but we wish to emphasise the importance of the need to communicate what UNRISD is in all its activities. It is important to note that all UNRISD staff must actively be engaged in promoting the organisation, in terms of its role, niche, size and funding, not limited to the content it generates. These recommendations are necessary to provide clarity on the role and niche of UNRISD to existing and new stakeholders in the short-term to provide a foundation for further activity to develop the role and work of UNRISD outlined in recommendations 4 and 5.

Putting UNRISD at the cutting edge of social development knowledge transfer practice

UNRISD's mandate established it as an autonomous space within the UN system for the conduct of policy-relevant, cutting-edge research on social development that is pertinent to the work of the UN system and nations bodies. To deliver its mandate it currently conducts and coordinates

multidisciplinary research, maintains a large network of researchers and stakeholders and conducts communications and outreach work to promote uptake and impact from its research.

The discussion of this evaluation's underpinning conceptual model on the evolving relationship between research, knowledge and policy (section 3.8) presents insights which we think UNRISD need to act on to develop its role. This would have two central objectives. These are firstly, to ensure that UNRISD explicitly develops the capabilities, many of which it already has, of an advanced knowledge management and transfer organisation to enhance the impact its research activities have. Secondly, it is a mechanism that could continue to close the gap between UNRISD and donor priorities of knowledge generation and impact from research respectively, noted in section 3.8 and bring these into better alignment.

We believe UNRISD could benefit from a more explicit reflection on how as an organisation it sits in a complex and evolving system of knowledge generators and users and how this means it should operate. This requires not just consideration of the substantive content and focus of its research programme but also of a consideration of the systems it is created and used in, and the dynamics and evidence needs of users in that system. This process should be an explicit part of developing a new institutional strategy for 2015 onwards and should result in a portfolio of not only research themes, programmes and projects but a portfolio of knowledge management activities targeted to different types of users and impacts.

This process of exploring new approaches to research themes, research and knowledge transfer methods will be a necessarily experimental process and one that should be developed in stages to complement UNRISD's existing tried and tested working methods. It may also be that, seen in this conceptual light, existing activities can be reworked. Our expectation is that with passing time the pressure to adopt new approaches to the conduct of research and delivery of research uptake and impact will only increase.

Recommendation 4: UNRISD should reflect on what it means to be a research institute working at the interface of social development research, knowledge and policy in the 21st Century. This will need to consider the focus of its research, the research methods it uses and mechanisms for delivery of research uptake and impact and building new approaches into its institutional strategy for 2015-onwards.

We acknowledge that this is a potentially complex and open-ended task but believe there is value for UNRISD to consider more explicitly not only the content of the research it conducts and coordinates but the functional roles it delivers in the context of the system it works in. This might for example, lead to a structuring of its activities around: research agenda setting; development and delivery of new research; a knowledge-transfer programme to ensure the most pertinent evidence from UNRISD and beyond makes its way into relevant UN policy process; and a responsive 'policy-led' programme used to engage new target audience (see recommendation 5 below for an approach to this). Many of these activities are currently performed by UNRISD but they could be made more explicit. As such, they would provide a wider range of activities and modes of creating research uptake and impact which would provide greater clarity to donors on the range of functions UNRISD perform and the value that flows from them.

Enhanced user engagement through policy-led knowledge transfer and responsive research

A desire was expressed from staff in various UN agencies for greater engagement with UNRISD and its work. The resource implications of this were acknowledged. However, there may be value in using policy-led knowledge transfer activities and responsive research as a complementary workstream to broader research activity to engage users and potential users in UNRISD's research.

As discussed in the conclusions this could be policy-led and a way of engaging policymakers on agendas of their choosing, reaching out to new audiences and understanding their evidence needs and raising UNRISD's profile in these areas. It could also be used as a means to add value to the large existing body of UNRISD research and to demonstrate more immediate value to donors through engagement of policymakers. An additional benefit of this activity could be to promote greater integration between the communications and research staff/function at UNRISD. Developing a knowledge transfer function may require input or even recruitment of a knowledge transfer expert with experience of the UNRISD research agendas and institutional settings.

Recommendation 5: UNRISD should explore developing a workstream around social development knowledge transfer and responsive research as a means to engage with new policy users on their agendas of interest.

Development of such a project could be used to explore the possibilities for recommendation 4.

Institutional management and processes

We have observed that UNRISD is a well-managed organisation capable of delivery of high quality research and communications under adverse circumstances. We have also noted that there are institutional aspects such as risk management, quality management and delivery of value for money that while present could be more explicitly addressed to improve the delivery of UNRISD's objectives. Donors are keen that the organisations they fund can demonstrate they are capable of managing risks and delivering high quality work and value for money, but approaches need to be suited to the organisation size and capacity.

In the case of risks UNRISD staff have good awareness of the risks facing the organisation which are described and captured in a variety of institutional documents. As such it would be relatively easy to bring this material together, for example, in reporting to the UNRISD board to formalise the organisation's approach to risk and be able to point donors to this when requested.

The external stakeholder interviews found some resistance, and in cases strongly expressed resistance, amongst stakeholders to the concept of value for money as applied to research or an organisation such as UNRISD with its long-term outcomes which are hard to definitively capture or measure. However, conceived as a process about learning from delivery and bringing innovation to an organisation's activities we feel value for money could be a useful concept for UNRISD to work with.

Recommendation 6: UNRISD should collate its existing knowledge of and responses to institutional risks and present these annually to the UNRISD Board for comment, advice and development.

Recommendation 7: Given the central importance of the research quality to delivering its objectives, and to maintain its high standards, UNRISD should more explicitly address quality in its work through building shared staff understanding and approaches to quality in research.

Recommendation 8: UNRISD should explore an approach to value for money based on generating an institutional culture that demonstrates the learning and innovation capacities of the organisation and complements its Results-Based Management system.

Funding

A positive resolution to UNRISD's funding situation is critical to its long-term future and success. Seeking project or programme funding is time-consuming; yet it will be essential for the foreseeable future. The recommendation that UNRISD seek more closely to define its core niche and its offering to the social development research and policy community is intended to assist in core, programme and project-based fundraising.

UNRISD already plans to convene a donor meeting. Building on a stronger identification and communication of UNRISD's niche, we concur with the suggestion from one interviewee that there would be value in UNRISD bringing together a group of bilaterals and philanthropists around a focused strategic agenda; flagging what *could* be achieved through movement in that agenda; and seeking to agree a compact for five to ten years with a group of like-minded funders.

The systems-based model we have described in section 3.8 may be a way of unpacking the roles, linkages, needs of different actors in social development research and policy. It could be used to explore how UNRISD can continue to deliver value in a way that more effectively links to the changing external context and donor priorities while remaining true to its mandate. As such we would suggest identification of headline possible themes for this event that focused both on the role of UNRISD and donors. For example:

- What does it mean to be an international research institute working at the interface of social development research, knowledge and policy in the 21st Century?
- How do donors derive value from investments in international social development research?
- How can the integrity and value of UNRISD's intellectual contribution to social development policy and research be maintained?

There will obviously be work for UNRISD to do in advance of this meeting but donors will also need to prepare and reflect on the issues raised in the evaluation. How can donors better provide support to UNRISD to build on the strengths identified in this evaluation? What do donors really want from UNRISD? How can donors support organisations that may fall outside or between standard support processes for research and/or aid? How can donors work together to simplify fundraising and reporting requirements, including possible collaborative funding arrangements, to allow UNRISD to focus on the delivery of an agreed multi-year strategy? How can funding stability be created? Are UNRISD traditional funding models going to deliver the resource required for UNRISD to exist and thrive in the medium to long term and if not how can existing donors provide support to allow a

transition to other models while maintaining the unique value of UNRISD?

The issue of UNRISD's size also needs to be addressed in these discussions and what it is reasonable to expect it to produce, even with some certainty of resource. The last Sida-funded evaluation (Nayyar et al., 2006) recommended doubling the size of the professional staff from the then 4 to 8. We would agree that increasing the size of the organisation over time is desirable to give it the capacity and critical mass to deliver across the breadth of its remit and also to give it greater institutional resilience. Should funding to expand staff numbers become available careful consideration should be given to the nature of staff required. There is an obvious opportunity to strategically align any recruitment with the challenges identified in this and previous evaluations and the advice given by consultants to UNRISD on communications and fundraising. This needs to balance UNRISD's needs for staff with high quality research and research coordination abilities, strong communications and fundraising track records and an understanding of the complex environment in which UNRISD works.

Given the central importance of secure funding to the future of UNRISD we consider that each of the recommendations we make needs to be capable of contributing to resolving the funding situation.

Recommendation 9: UNRISD should continue to work with current and recent past funders to secure short to medium-term funding and develop other medium to long-term options following that. UNRISD should adopt and develop responses to the other recommendations in this report to assist in securing funding by more clearly demonstrating to potential funders the unique role of UNRISD and the value it brings to social development research and policy.

A final challenge to donors: Invest in the long-term

For even the most outcome-oriented research institute, research time moves more slowly than the worlds of politics or policy.

Some of UNRISD's core strengths lie in its ability to carry out long-term studies in multiple countries, generating significant and methodologically robust new data and insights that gather part of its validity as a result of its timeframe. Our interviews have told us that over its fifty-year history, UNRISD's impact and policy influence have been greatest when its long-term research commitments and outputs are able to feed into policy spaces and arenas that may not have been more than the faintest smoke on the horizon when those research commitments began.

Much of UNRISD's research addresses systemic factors in the social policy landscape; including gender, policy, finance, and trade and investment. Such research is inherently more valuable when its insights can be gathered both consistently and robustly over longer time-frames than the typical one to three-year demand-driven (and potentially donor-driven) research projects allow.

For its donors, an investment in UNRISD ought to be an investment in careful, long-term, inclusive research and analysis with the potential substantially to inform – and even to change – the shape and delivery of social policy around the world. Take away the notion of 'long-term investment' and the value of the research that can be generated through a model that is wholly dependent on short-term funding is likely to be diminished. That is likely to be the case no matter how accomplished the

institution or its researchers are at generating multiplier effects from separately funded short-term projects.

In a world where short-term considerations too often trump long-term creation of social value, this is a challenge that UNRISD and the donor community need to resolve jointly. To invest in UNRISD for the long-term is to invest in a public good. UNRISD provides a valuable and important part of the collective institutional and human capacity carefully to analyse and shape social development policies and processes in our interconnected world. UNRISD's value is clear but its future needs to be secured.

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