

occasional paper no. 4
world summit for social development

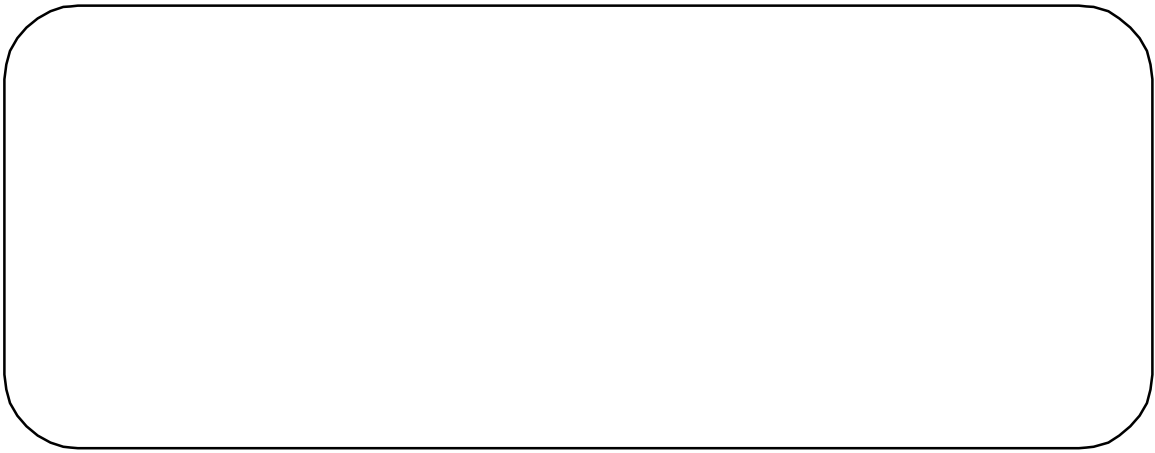
*social integration:
institutions and actors*

by marshall wolfe



unrisd

united nations research institute for social development



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preface

The World Summit for Social Development, to be held in Copenhagen in March 1995, provides an important opportunity for the world community to focus attention on current social problems and to analyse the dimensions, roots and directions of social trends. In particular, the agenda of the Summit specifies three areas of concern: the reduction of poverty, the generation of productive employment, and the enhancement of social integration. UNRISD work in preparation for the Summit focuses on the last of these: as countries confront the seemingly intractable problems of social conflict, institutional breakdown and mass alienation, the topic of **social integration** has assumed increasing importance in public debate.

The UNRISD Occasional Paper series brought out as part of the Social Summit preparatory process takes up a range of issues relating to social integration. This paper examines the processes of social integration and disintegration as they work themselves out through a range of institutions and actors — from intergovernmental organizations and transnational corporations to local communities and grassroots organizations. The acceleration of economic and cultural integration on a world scale, and the associated phenomena of polarization and exclusion, are posing serious challenges to the capacities and legitimacy of many of the institutions considered in this paper.

In the first part, the author makes an assessment of how these institutions have been responding to the multiple challenges facing them. Their responses, it is argued, in turn influence how policy makers, theorists and the general public perceive their legitimacy and future roles. While the responsibilities of intergovernmental institutions continue to broaden and diversify, their capacity to respond to new challenges in a coherent way is hindered by the segmentation of their bureaucratic structures and responsibilities. Also active at the global level are the transnational enterprises, which have extended their reach on a world scale, but are facing increasing pressure to make better sense of the responsibilities that flow from their global penetration. The nation states are suffering from reduced autonomy but without other institutions being able to assume responsibility for some of their roles. The legitimacy of the modern state has suffered from perceived discrepancies between its ideal functioning and commitments, and the behaviour of its political and bureaucratic actors, coming at a time of economic slowdown and insecurity. The shortcomings of past state action in pursuit of “development”, “welfare” or “real socialism” have been used ideologically to discredit the state. Yet, the author concludes, this ideological rejection of the state can hardly triumph over the long term,

although it complicates the urgent task of reassessing essential state responsibilities.

The shrinkage of state resources and discrediting of its services in poorer countries, coupled with mounting poverty and exclusion, have altered the division of responsibilities between the state and the institutions of civil society. Here a prominent trend is the enhanced legitimacy, self-confidence, and wider responsibilities of issue-oriented organizations and NGOs. While there are several reasons for the high profile currently enjoyed by NGOs, their ability to justify the hopes vested in them remains unclear. Another significant trend has been the declining representativeness and influence of long established class and interest-group organizations.

In the second part, the author looks at the responsibilities for social integration, focusing in particular on the role played by nation states and global institutions. The exercise is undertaken with extreme caution, given the changing visibility of “major problems” and the tendency for “integrative solutions” to become problems in their turn. The discussion of state responsibilities is anchored in a careful interpretation of democracy and an appreciation of the extreme diversity in real national situations which renders universalistic norms and utopian blueprints highly infeasible. Some general principles are nevertheless proposed to social actors striving to make these states better perform their roles: subordinating policy to democratic choice and uncertainty of outcome (i.e. there is no “one right way” to achieve social integration or any other goal); avoiding the “organicist” view of the nation state (i.e. accommodating difference rather than imposing stifling conformism); accommodating diverse sources of conflict and the continual emergence of new groups claiming a voice in democratic decision-making; striving for transparency; and, finally, self-limitation of state interventions should not be taken to imply state relinquishment of previous responsibilities for social services and regulation of threats to public welfare.

At the international level, the effort to strengthen democracy and respect for human rights will have to ensure that democracy is not simply equated with cosmetic achievements (e.g. elections). The principles of democracy (noted above) are hard to internalize for power contenders in any society, and self-anointed leaders or dominant minorities will continue to use a range of justifications to camouflage their determination to prevent opposition forces from emerging. By intensifying their interactions with a highly critical and diverse public opinion, international actors can overcome such mystification.

A more dominant set of institutions at the global level has been the array of intergovernmental lending agencies and multinational enterprises. In recent years many of them have been held responsible for mounting poverty and social exclusion; some of them are now striving to work out their own conceptions of social responsibility and to reconcile them with their economic imperatives. If there is to be any hope of coherency in the

formulation of norms for policies on social integration, their participation will be indispensable.

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September 1994

Dharam Ghai
Director

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