



# UNRISD

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development  
Institut de Recherche des Nations Unies pour le Développement Social

## **Blockchain for Inclusive and Sustainable Development: Fact or Fantasy?**

Wednesday 24 October 2018, 15.00-17.00, Room VIII, Palais des Nations, Geneva

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes the role that innovation plays in support of sustainable development. UNRISD has explored the kinds of policy, institutional and social innovations that can be harnessed to realize the vision of the 2030 Agenda. Our research has found that innovations that have driven transformative change towards equitable, inclusive and sustainable development are those that are grounded in universal and rights-based approaches; embed economic growth within equitable and sustainable social and environmental outcomes; and foster truly participatory processes of decision making.

An important emerging innovation receiving growing attention lately is blockchain/distributed ledger technology. The application of this technology has potential impacts across a wide range of public policy priorities and business applications from health care and education, to land registries and mobile identity, to energy grids and agricultural supply chains, as well as cryptocurrencies. Blockchain innovation is evolving at a rapid pace and on a global scale, with the number of start-ups pitching ideas continuing to grow. Proponents argue that blockchain has the potential to improve efficiency, reduce transaction costs, and increase transparency and trust across a wide range of sectors.

As a new and potentially disruptive technology, however, blockchain will not be exempt from the diffusion patterns that other equally disruptive technologies such as the Internet have experienced in most developing countries. Indeed, half of the world's population already does not benefit from the Internet. A key risk is that inequality in access will reproduce rather than reduce other forms of inequality). What actions, by whom, can prevent blockchain technology from further deepening the very inequalities being fought/addressed elsewhere by the 2030 Agenda?

This UNRISD Seminar will give development practitioners and researchers a better understanding of the potential of blockchain technology to contribute to the implementation and achievement of sustainable development. Speakers come from the blockchain community of thinkers, innovators and practitioners who are exploring the consequences of blockchain for social good and human development.

The Seminar will introduce the main characteristics of blockchain and distributed ledger technology, and present examples of its application across a range of use cases. It will also consider the risks and constraints related to deploying blockchain applications from the perspective of equitable, inclusive and sustainable development, and what can be done to mitigate them. Participants will explore the following questions.

- How realistic are our expectations about what blockchain solutions can do?
- How easy will they be to implement and how quickly they can be scaled up?
- What are the latest applications of blockchain technologies?
- In what ways are applications supporting implementation of the SDGs? What have been the impacts on social inclusion and exclusion? Who shares in the benefits? What are the implications in terms of ownership, access, empowerment and opportunity?
- In a time of growing scepticism towards cross-border trade and open markets, and rising anti-globalization sentiments, how is blockchain redefining trust?
- What can we say so far about using blockchain to strengthen governance? What are the regulatory and policy precedents, concerns and responses?

## Provisional Programme

(5 mins) Welcome and introduction: Paul Ladd, Director, UNRISD

Moderator: Maria Mexi, Senior Research Fellow, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva

### Speakers

**(20 mins) Helen Hai** (UNIDO Goodwill Ambassador for Industrialization in Africa, and Head of the Blockchain Charity Foundation) will describe how blockchain could be used to mitigate SDG funding gaps, and transform global charitable and philanthropic activities by increasing transparency and accountability. Two key elements in this approach are strong leadership that can shape strategies of public-private collaboration, and successful examples where blockchain applications are driving social impact. Helen will also share cases being developed to enable transparent philanthropy (where donations are traced all the way down to individual recipients), and a mentorship project that aims to improve global awareness of “blockchain for social good”.

**(15 mins) Ivonne Higuero** (Director, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) will present some use cases currently being implemented, and comment on how these either contribute directly to the Sustainable Development Goals or support the 2030 Agenda. Blockchain has the potential to disrupt the way we do business, as its use expands to new areas on a daily basis. What promise does it hold for sustainable development? What current examples encourage greater adoption of this technology in the cross-border exchange of goods, the provision of legal identity, the circular economy and financial services for the poor? How can we ensure sustainability of this innovative tool? What is needed from a standards development perspective to provide stability and to support its use?

**(15 mins) Leander Bindewald** (Researcher and Consultant, MONNETA / Network for Monetary Diversity) will give an overview of where blockchain technologies and cryptocurrencies sit in the wider field of social technologies, monetary innovation and financial reform. He will highlight why prominent examples have so far failed to deliver on the envisioned opportunities, but how the challenge they offer to policy makers and regulators has been a much-needed wake up call. From theory to financial and technological literacy and even current legal frameworks, blockchain technologies have posed the questions but not yet delivered the answers that are required for social and environmentally equitable development.

**(10 mins) Discussant—Jem Bendell** (Professor of Sustainability Leadership, Founder of the Institute for Sustainability Leadership at the University of Cumbria) will weigh in on the “Fact or Fantasy” question. How realistic are the expectations about what blockchain solutions can do? What have we seen so far in terms of how the technology has been applied? In what ways are applications supporting implementation of the SDGs? What have been the impacts on social inclusion and exclusion? Who shares in the benefits? What are the implications in terms of ownership, access and opportunity? What actions, by whom, can prevent blockchain technology from further deepening the very inequalities being fought elsewhere by the 2030 Agenda?

(10 mins) Follow-up questions from the moderator.

**(45 mins) Interactive dialogue around the “Fact or Fantasy” question.**