

Hour of truth arrives for Rio+20

Rio de Janeiro, 18 June (Martin Khor+) - The hour of truth will arrive in a matter of days for the Rio+20 summit in Brazil. Whether they will have a plan of action to adopt is still an open question, because of continuing disagreements over a draft, despite intense negotiations over the past week.

It is expected that around a hundred Presidents and Prime Ministers will meet on 20-22 June to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit of 1992, also held in Rio.

They are supposed to renew their political commitment to act urgently to address the world's worsening environment crisis as well as the economic and social problems that have increased due to the global financial crisis.

Since the preparatory meeting resumed on 15 June in Rio, the delegates from almost 200 countries have worked almost around the clock to iron out their differences.

But many remain. On the night of Friday 15 June, there were 315 paragraphs in the draft of an action plan. But only 116 of those paragraphs had been agreed to, and another 199 were still contested.

A decision was then taken to hand over the leadership of the meeting to the host country, as from 15 June night. Brazilian Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota announced that his Brazilian colleagues would come out with a new draft and use it to conduct consultations in hope that a final text will be agreed to, on 18 June, before the leaders arrive.

Saturday 16 June was spent in the huge convention centre known as Riocentro waiting for a new text that was finally issued only around 7 p.m. The fate of the conference depends significantly on how this text is received by the delegates.

A meeting was convened at 8.30 p.m. to hear initial views on the new draft. Senior Brazilian official

Luiz Machado said the document tried to keep a certain balance, and if no one is happy, that is part of the exercise.

The response from delegates was mixed. All praised Brazil for its brave attempt to produce a new draft.

The developing countries were more welcoming, with the Algerian chair of the Group of 77 and China saying the new text now assured members that the conference would have an outcome, proving the skeptics wrong.

But he and other developing countries criticised the text for giving nothing on the "means of implementation", or the provision of finance and technology to developing countries to support their move towards sustainable development.

The Algerian ambassador quoted a delegation as telling him that although developing countries were asked take on new obligations (such as shifting to a green economy and adhering to new sustainable development goals), there was nothing new in finance and technology for developing countries. How then are these countries going to implement their shift to sustainable development?

But the criticisms coming from developing countries were mild compared to the scathing attack from the European Union. It complained that its proposals on the green economy and on sustainable development goals had not been retained, and concluded this was not a text worthy of heads of governments to adopt.

The United States was very brief, indicating "very serious concerns" with the text, especially on the means of implementation.

These initial reactions indicated that although the new text is accepted as the basis for negotiations, it has not resolved most of the key issues.

The old battles will thus resume in the next few days over issues such as reaffirming the original Rio principles, the green economy, launching new sustainable development goals, the institutional framework, mobilising finance and technology transfer.

Given the limited time left, it will be a real uphill task to get an agreement.

From the developing countries' viewpoint there are several good things in the text. The Rio principles are reaffirmed, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and equity. This has been a "must" for developing countries, but resisted by some developed countries.

On technology transfer, one part of the text adopts the old principles of technology transfer on favourable terms including on concessional and preferential terms as mutually agreed.

But in the key section on technology, the term "transfer" is removed from the title and the term used is "technology transfer on mutually agreed terms."

The text is also weak on setting up a mechanism for technology transfer. The UN agencies are asked to identify options for technology transfer, but there is no decision to set up a new mechanism to follow up on the study so that there can be actual transfer of technology.

On finance, the usual promise that developed countries will provide "new and additional financial resources" is missing, as is the G77 proposal to set up a new fund initially with US\$30 billion a year.

Instead, the text proposes to set up a committee of 30 countries to propose options for a Sustainable Development Financing Strategy.

These proposals to ask the UN to come up with technology options, and for a committee to examine options for a finance strategy, are very weak, compared to the demands for actually setting up a technology mechanism and a new fund.

A decision only to talk about options is hardly a promise to take concrete action. Even then, some developed countries are expected to oppose the text on even such mild proposals.

Wrangling over such a text representing a very low level of ambition in supporting developing countries is a worrisome sign of the times we live in.

Hopefully an agreement can be reached by the delegates in the next three days, otherwise the Summit will be devoid of an action plan to tackle the world's most urgent problems.

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