



Debate on SDGs prior to adoption of outcome document during negotiations

Rio de Janeiro (Bhumika Muchhala) – A key outcome of the Rio+20 Conference is agreement to launch sustainable development goals (SDGs).

The final outcome document produced after a week of intense negotiations was especially heated over the SDGs in the last two days of discussions on June 17 and 18, with diverging positions between the G77 and China and the European Union over the process by which the SDGs would be developed.

A key area of conflict that emerged related to whether the modalities and work agenda for developing the SDGs would be led by the UN Secretary General or the UN General Assembly's member states. The G77 were committed to their proposal for an intergovernmental, open and inclusive process by which the modalities of the SDG framework are to be established, and subsequently, the process by which the SDGs will come into action in the global development agenda.

The central concern of the G77 was that if the SDG process occurs entirely under the leadership and agenda-setting power of the UN Secretary General's office, the leadership of member states would be significantly challenged. The G77 thus called for a working group, comprised of representatives that are nominated by member states.

The G77 was keen to ensure that the representatives have an integrated and balanced knowledge of all three pillars of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), and that regional commissions of the UN are also able to provide input from national consultations in their respective regions.

Another key concern for the G77 was that the SDGs should remain consistent with the Rio principles notably the principle of common but

differentiated responsibilities (see previous article on CBDR).

Negotiations during the pre-conference consultations on the SDG section of the outcome document were based on the version of the outcome document put forth by the Brazilian Presidency on 16 June. The Brazilian text was produced following consultations with member states as well as months of intergovernmental negotiations that had taken place in New York and in Rio de Janeiro during the prepcom from 13-15 June.

The SDG section of the final Rio+20 outcome document, which was adopted on 19 June, is included in Section V, on the "framework for action and follow-up."

The first paragraph (245) underscores that "the MDGs are a useful tool in focusing achievement of specific development gains as part of a broad development vision and framework for the development activities of the UN, for national priority setting and for mobilization of stakeholders and resources towards common goals." A commitment to achieving the MDGs in a "full and timely" fashion is emphasized.

Paragraph 246 recognizes that SDGs are "...to be based on Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, with a full respect to all Rio Principles, taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and priorities." The SDGs are also to be "are consistent with international law, build upon commitments already made, and contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major Summits in the economic, social and environmental fields, including this outcome document."

Paragraph 246 also stresses that the SDGs "...should address and incorporate in a balanced

way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages. They should be coherent with and integrated in the UN Development Agenda beyond 2015, thus contributing to the achievement of sustainable development and serving as a driver for implementation and mainstreaming of sustainable development in the United Nations system as a whole.” However, the paragraph cautions that the development of these goals “...should not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the MDGs.”

The outcome document in paragraph 247 also underscores “...that SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. There is a recognition that the goals should address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development, being guided by this outcome document. Governments should drive implementation with the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate.”

Paragraph 250 on the SDGs recognized that progress towards the achievement of the goals need to be assessed and accompanied by targets and indicators while taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and levels of development.

While the EU in particular wanted to list out what some of these SDG targets would look like, the G77 said that the current platform was not the appropriate forum, nor process, in which such a sensitive and complex discussion on SDG targets could take place. That is why a proper process needs to be established in which a legitimate and balanced discussion can take place to develop themes and indicators for the SDGs.

Paragraph 251 recognizes that there is a need for global, integrated and scientifically-based information on sustainable development. The relevant bodies of the UN system, within their respective mandates, are called upon to support regional economic commissions and to collect and compile national inputs in order to inform this global effort. Member states also committed to mobilizing financial resources and capacity building, particularly for developing countries, to achieve this endeavour.

The debate over the SDG process

The negotiations on the process by which the SDGs will be addressed are contained in paragraphs 248 and 249 in the final outcome document. These two paragraphs read:

“248. We resolve to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on SDGs that is open to all stakeholders with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the United Nations General Assembly. An open working group shall be constituted no later than the opening of the 67th session of the UNGA and shall comprise of thirty representatives, nominated by Member States through the five UN regional groups with the aim of achieving fair, equitable and balanced geographic representation. At the outset, this open working group will decide on its method of work, including developing modalities, to ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community and the UN system in its work in order to provide a diversity of perspectives and experience. It will submit a report to the 68th session of the UNGA containing a proposal for sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action.

249. The process needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes considering the post-2015 development agenda. The initial input to the work of the working group will be provided by the United Nations Secretary General in consultations with national governments. In order to provide technical support to this process and to the work of the working group, we request the UN Secretary-General to ensure all necessary input and support to this work from the UN system including through establishing an inter-agency technical support team and expert panels as needed, drawing on all relevant expert advice. Reports on the progress of work will be made regularly to the General Assembly.”

The **G77**’s position was focused on establishing an intergovernmental process on SDGs that is inclusive, transparent, geographically representative and open to all stakeholders. The **EU**’s position was bent on a process that would be driven by the UN Secretary General’s office, in consultation with UN member states.

With regard to formulating the modalities of the SDG process, the **G77** said it was unacceptable for the UN Secretary General and his office to establish the modalities of the group that will

develop the SDGs. The G77 said that the UN General Assembly and its member states should be charged with developing the modalities of the SDG process, and that inputs from member states form the basis of a working group.

The “open working group” mentioned in paragraph 248 was referred to as a “Steering Committee” in the Brazilian text of 16 June. The G77 said that it was not necessary, at this current preliminary juncture of the SDG discussion, to label the group of people nominated by member states as a “Steering Committee.” Rather, the group could be seen as an “open working group.” This was duly incorporated into the final text of the outcome document.

In order to cement a process genuinely led by the input from member states, the G77 expressed the importance that initial submissions from member states need to form the basis of a working group.

In the area of accountability, the G77 proposed that every meeting of the working group that is formed should produce a report that is circulated to all member states as well as the general public, and that the meetings should be open, inclusive and participatory. If any member state or stakeholder wishes to attend as an observer, that meeting should be well-announced, the location must be accessible and the room should be able to accommodate everyone.

The G77 also proposed that regional commissions of the UN should be invited to make contributions by holding consultations in their respective regions and subsequently feeding the results into the working group. Such a process for regional commissions would address the importance of including an active engagement at both regional and national levels.

The G77 also said that with regard to the specific number of thirty people to comprise the group, it is helpful to look at how the UN has designed many of its institutions in the past. The G77 proposed that a better number of individuals would be 47, the exact configuration of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, which is based on a fair balance of geographic regions.

The **EU** in response to the G77 said that the SDG process is fundamentally a coordination task for the UN Secretary General. The G77’s proposal to have a working group that carries out a continuous process of negotiation is not acceptable, and the

EU stated it has made its position consistently clear throughout the negotiations.

The EU said that the authority of the General Assembly in the SDG process can be established in a way that is different from what the G77 is proposing. The EU said they believed that the voice of governments can be heard in many different ways, and that a “third way” can be designed for a viable process. This third way would not place the SDG process entirely in the hands of the Secretary General, as the EU has proposed in the past. However, it would not be placed in the hands of an external group of representatives either.

The EU appealed to the Chair’s services to carve out a “middle ground compromise,” one that can draw on the expertise of the UN agencies and other stakeholders, in the manner of a substantive feedback, but one which also does not result in a continued round of negotiations between member states.

The EU also stated that they have continuously argued for outlining an SDG process that includes both modalities and substantive issues, and they were dismayed that there was no discussion on substance. To what extent will Rio+20 achieve a definition of themes and issues for the SDGs, the EU asked.

The EU said the discussion cannot be pinned down only to process, as that is effectively when the EU starts to draw a red line, due to the clear political mandate that EU governments have to engage on the substantive themes for SDGs.

The **United States** supported the EU and also responded negatively to the G77’s proposal, clearly stating that they want to see the SDGs as an outcome of the Rio+20 process. The US said that the purpose of the SDGs is to draw the attention of the world community to a particular group of issues that global action can be mobilised around.

The US also criticised the G77 by saying that the proposals put forward by the G77 are “irrational, bureaucratic and cumbersome.” The US said, “We do not think that the G77’s proposal can achieve an SDG process going forward,” and inferred that the G77 is letting “the ideal be the enemy of the good.”

The US also stated its preference for the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) rather than the G77’s preference for the Human Rights Council, as

the UN body that the governance process for SDGs should be modelled after. The US said that the FAO has 7 regional groups, from which representatives are nominated.

Canada said that its priority is to support the Brazilian Chair and to work with the Chair's proposals on the SDG modalities, precisely because Canada believed that SDGs are a strong potential outcome from this conference.

The Brazilian facilitator of this discussion, Ambassador Raphael Azeredo, stressed that SDGs were the "crown jewel" of the outcome document and the Rio+20 Conference. As such, the attitude in the discussions thus far did not reflect political will or the desire to bridge gaps to come to an effective closure on the text.

Most importantly, it does not permit the UN to launch the process. The Ambassador repeatedly appealed to member states to find a working compromise to the conceptual divides on how the SDGs ought to be launched by the UN.

In response, the **G77** said that it was not surprising that a solution still remained distant. While the G77 was conscious about the EU's aversion to a process of ongoing negotiations in the format of a working group, the G77 clarified that the process they are trying to launch for the SDGs is not simply about negotiations. It is about achieving the distinct result of designing a framework or a set of goals that will be implemented by countries voluntarily and by the UN system as a whole.

The G77 emphasised that the process and governance structure they feel is fair and appropriate is not based on the primacy of negotiations. It is based on the need for the SDG process to be able to grapple with a multitude of issues and concerns across the range of economic, social and environmental issues.

The G77 said that a third alternative process, which may sound better to the EU, could involve a consultative mechanism in the UN General Assembly, under the President of the General Assembly.

While the G77 did not foreclose this option, it stated its firm belief that the SDG process must be *intergovernmental*, in that it should be inclusive and participatory, and as has been said repeatedly, the need for expertise and input needs to be recognised.

The role of the UN Secretary General is crucial, in order to provide necessary support to member states and to help build the intergovernmental process. However, the G77 said that the Secretary General cannot be in charge of the SDG process, and with this red line, there was indeed a huge chasm between the G77 and the EU.

The **EU** responded by insisting that they too are looking for a process that is open and transparent, but such a process is not resembled by the G77's proposal. There is a substantive problem with setting up a body or group, the EU said, in that the added value was not clear. The SDG process is not merely an intergovernmental process, as the G77 describes. And it is unclear to the EU how stakeholders, experts and UN agencies will contribute in constructive ways.

The EU once again asserted that the SDG process is fundamentally a coordination task for the UN Secretary General, and that a list of themes and priority areas that SDGs should focus on needs to be included. Without such a list, the SDGs are simply "not attractive."

The **G77** reacted to the EU's insistence on the governance power of the UN Secretary General as a "very disturbing" issue.

With regard to the EU's insistence on listing out thematic areas for SDGs, the G77 said that the process should provide guidance and determine what the themes are.

The G77 justified their view by saying that while a wide range of views on themes and elements are necessary, the moment certain issues are placed in higher importance than other issues in a negotiation process, trouble can brew on how to justify this importance.