



## Rio+20: Mandated follow-up actions are key

Rio de Janeiro, 25 June (Martin Khor) - Because the world is facing serious crises in the global environment and economy, much was expected of last week's Rio+20 summit.

Thus there was deep public disappointment that the hundred heads of state and government who came to Rio de Janeiro were unable to take decisive actions. There was a sense that the speeches, roundtables and panel discussions at the huge Rio Centro conference centre were part of a ceremonial function for the political leaders, while the tough decisions required by the crises were avoided or postponed.

The summit adopted a document, "The Future We Want", that contained little new in urgent action. It reaffirmed or recalled what had been agreed to 20 or 10 years ago (at the first Rio Summit and the Johannesburg Summit that produced a Plan of Implementation respectively), and directed that the talks continue in the United Nations (in New York) to strengthen institutions, examine whether to provide finance and technology to developing countries, and establish new sustainable development goals.

Measured against the urgent tasks needed, there were no breakthroughs. But neither was the summit a failure that many portrayed it to be.

Faced with the prospect of a real breakdown, the officials representing almost 200 countries pulled back from the brink and worked out last minute compromises in an agreed text just before their political leaders arrived.

Multilateralism in sustainable development was put to the test and survived to live another day.

The outcome document agreed to just about meet the minimum requirements of success, given the deteriorating state of international cooperation and the tough battles that developing countries had to

fight in the past year to get their points across.

It was often a frustrating and seemingly hopeless task. But in the end the developing countries prevailed on several issues.

At the closing plenary on 22 June night, the Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, hailed the outcome document as a historic step for sustainable development. She said it was a "starting point" and not a "threshold or ceiling" for implementing the path to sustainable development that had to be ambitious and should serve as a legacy for future generations.

Those were well chosen words, for the document does not itself contain high action points, but is a start, in opening the way to potentially important actions.

The biggest battle in the last week of negotiations in Rio was to get developed countries, especially the United States, to renew the original commitments of the historic 1992 Earth Summit. Without that, the summit would have been a disaster. On almost the last day, the US gave in. The document in paragraph 15 now reaffirms the 1992 Rio principles, including the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR).

The CBDR as well as equity are also "recalled" as the basis of action in the global climate regime, a victory for developing countries since these two principles were notably absent in the decision at the climate talks last December on starting negotiations on a new Durban Platform under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

(Paragraph 191 has this sentence: "... We recall that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change provides that parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind on

the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities ...")

On technology, the US and others refused to reaffirm their commitment to transfer technology to developing countries, insisting that this be voluntary and on mutually agreed terms (meaning that technology transfer would be on commercial terms). This led to very intense and heated exchanges. On the last day, the US agreed to language that "recalled" the technology text in the 2002 Rio+10 summit in Johannesburg, including technology transfer on favourable terms to developing countries.

On finance for developing countries, the developed countries have watered down their previous commitments, this time refusing to the usual terms "new and additional financial resources." Instead, there are references to getting funds from a "variety of sources" and "new partnerships", a code for the reduced importance (and quantum) in developed countries' government financing for developing countries.

To save the show, it was agreed that a discussion will start at the UN to look at options for a sustainable development financing strategy. And the UN is asked to prepare a report on a technology facilitating mechanism for the UN General Assembly to discuss.

These are very weak actions to be carried forward, and will hardly convince developing countries that they will get the means (finance and technology) to implement new obligations on environment and sustainable development.

Thus, the developed countries have not maintained their level of commitments of 20 or even 10 years ago, whether on sustainable development principles or on finance and technology.

Developing countries in effect made significant concessions in accepting the very watered down language, and this must be seen as their major contribution to an outcome for Rio+20.

A new item in the Rio outcome is the decision to set up sustainable development goals (SDGs). This will be done in the next year through a 30-member working group in the UN, nominated by governments. The topics in the goals will include all three aspects of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental.

Developed countries, especially the European Union (EU), were disappointed that the summit

itself did not adopt some specific environmental goals that they put forward. The developing countries argued there was no time to agree on what the initial goals would be, since economic and social goals also have to be included.

(The EU argued that their goals had non-environmental aspects but developing countries pointed out that the 5 goals were essentially environmental.)

The document has a large section on "green economy". This topic had absorbed most of the time and energy of the summit's preparatory meetings over the last two years. The EU in particular was advocating having a UN endorsed green economy roadmap with specific goals and targets.

But developing countries had many concerns, being afraid the "green economy" concept would replace "sustainable development", that it may justify trade protectionism, and that there would be "green economy" obligations that all countries have to adhere to without the corresponding means of implementation from developed countries to developing countries.

After a titanic fight lasting over a year, it was finally agreed in Rio that "green economy policies" (as opposed to a definitive "free economy") are only one of the tools for sustainable development, that these would not be a rigid set of rules, and that there would be a set of 16 principles including avoidance of trade protection and aid conditionality.

The document also has a large section on action on many topics, including water, oceans, biodiversity, food and agriculture, cities, poverty eradication. These contain proposals and promised actions, most of which are very useful as guidelines for countries to implement.

It was also agreed that the UN Environment Programme would be strengthened and upgraded, including through universal membership of its governing council and increased financing. But the proposal to convert it to a specialised agency did not succeed.

Potentially the most important decision in Rio was to set up a high level political forum on sustainable development, to replace the existing Commission on Sustainable Development. The forum would provide political leadership, set the agenda and enable regular dialogue, consider new sustainable development challenges, review progress in

implementation and improve coordination in the UN system.

The main problem over the past 20 years is that declarations and action plans are made, but the institutions to implement them have been too weak. If the new forum can have a wide agenda, a big enough mandate to act, a dynamic process of discussion and decision making, a strong secretariat and high political backing, then the modest document coming out of the Rio+20 summit can

be transformed into a world-changing process and organisation.

The success of any conference is ultimately determined on the strength of the follow-up. Rio+20 could remain a disappointment, or could become the start of something significant. In that sense, Rio+20 has not ended, but only started, as the Brazilian President stated at the summit's closure.