

Sustainable Development Goals – a key deliverable?

Rio de Janeiro, 13 June (Meena Raman) – As the conclusion of the third round of informal negotiations in New York on 2 June on the outcome document for the Rio+20 Conference, one area being touted as a key deliverable for the Summit is the launch of a process to define ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs).

Secretary-General of the Rio+20 Conference, Sha Zukang, at the closing session of the informal negotiations (which began on 29 May), said that one key deliverable at the Rio Summit to be held on 20-22 June, would be the launch of a process to define the SDGs which would be an essential feature of the post-2015 development framework. He did highlight that a few crucial issues remain unresolved which include how the three dimensions of sustainable development (the economic, social and environment pillars) are integrated, the process to develop the goals and the priority areas for possible goals.

An interesting and intense exchange of views among countries was held on 1-2 June in the ‘splinter’ group (in a smaller group setting) discussion on SDGs, which was facilitated by Barbados.

Among the questions discussed were the principles and scope of the SDGs; the complementarity of the SDGs with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); the process to develop them and whether there should be a listing of the areas of priorities.

Parties have agreed *ad ref* (*ad referendum*, meaning it is provisionally agreed with no bracketed text and subject to the whole outcome document being agreed to) to the first paragraph of the Co-chairs’ text which refers to the MDGs and reads as follow:

“SDG 1. We underscore 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 United Nations, for national priority setting and for mobilisation of stakeholders and resources towards common goals. We therefore remain firmly committed to their full and timely achievement.”

Principles

In relation to the 2nd paragraph of the text on SDGs, the G77 and China (G77) proposed an alternative text to the Co-chairs’ proposal which was supported by Turkey as follows:

“SDG 2 alt. We recognize the importance and utility of a set of sustainable development goals, which are based on Agenda 21 and JPOI (Johannesburg Programme of Implementation), fully respect Rio Principles, in particular common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), build upon commitments already made, respect international law and contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major Summits in economic, social and environmental fields, taking into account that these goals should ensure a holistic coherence with the goals set in Agenda 21. These goals should be incorporated in the United Nations 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.”

In explaining the proposal, Pakistan for the G77 stressed that the universal application of the SDGs did not mean uniformity of application and insisted on the principle of CBDR to guide the goals.

The United States in response said that the SDGs are about global goals which are universally applicable. The idea is to have actions at the national level towards those goals.

Following discussions in the splinter group, the facilitator (Barbados) made the following proposal:

“SDG 2. We recognize that the development of goals could also be useful for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development. We further recognize the importance and utility of a set of sustainable development goals, which are based on Agenda 21 and JPOI, fully respect the Rio Principles, in particular common but differentiated responsibilities, build upon commitments already made, respect international law and contribute to the full implementation of the

outcomes of all major Summits in economic, social and environmental fields, taking into account that these goals should ensure a holistic coherence with the goals set out in Agenda 21. These goals should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages. These goals should be incorporated and integrated in the United Nations 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. The development of these goals should not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.”

According to the latest version of the outcome document (2 June, 5 pm) that will be the basis for further negotiations in Rio de Janeiro next week, the above paragraph has been *agreed ad ref* (*ad referendum*, meaning it is provisionally agreed with no bracketed text and subject to the whole outcome document being agreed to). This means that the SDGs would respect the CBDR principle.

SDGs and the MDGs

On the issue of complementarity between the SDGs and MDGs, the G77 asked developed countries how they visualised the post-2015 development agenda. The G77 expressed concern that there was potential for the focus on the MDGs to be lost.

The European Union said that the SDGs should not impact the post-2015 MDGs.

Switzerland said that the SDGs must build upon the MDGs and all goals must come under a general framework. It said that the post MDG process had started and the two processes (the MDGs and the SDGs) should have a regular exchange and must be well informed and at one point, they can converge.

New Zealand did not want the MDGs to be undermined. The EU stressed that both the MDGs and the SDGs will come together and the SDG was not a sub-set of the MDGs.

The US said that if there were two processes, Member States could not prejudge the process and the relationship between the SDGs and whatever would follow post-MDGs.

Norway said that the SDGs are at the beginning of a process and they would complement the MDGs. They will be in a post-2015 framework for some common framework.

The G77 said that incorporating the SDGs in the UN Development Agenda meant that the MDGs and the SDGs are on par and one is not subservient to the other. It said that many developing countries are wondering if

the developed country partners would “jump ship” (from the MDGs) with the SDGs “being the new girl or boy in town” and this was a major concern.

To list or not to list priorities for SDGs

On whether there should be a listing of focused priority areas for the SDGs, the Co-chairs had on 22 May proposed the following:

“SDG 5. We also recognize that the goals should address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development including, inter alia, energy, water, food security, oceans and sustainable consumption and production as well as cross-cutting issues like equity and social inclusion, rule of law and good governance, gender equality and women’s empowerment.”

The G77 made clear that the mandate of the Group was not to have a listing of thematic areas. Having a small list was a hazard and the moment a listing exercise is carried out, many countries would want their priorities on the table. Some countries (referring to the developed countries) wanted an “early or entire harvest” with a small list of priorities while others (from the developing countries) wanted a more comprehensive approach. The G77 as of now could not agree to any listing of priority areas. It said that the process to launch the SDGs should be able to give the guidance on what kind of areas to focus on.

The EU, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, Norway, Canada, the US and New Zealand all supported the need for an indicative list, with many of them saying that having an outcome in Rio just to launch a process was not enough for “their leaders” and it was useful to have leaders provide the guidance needed. Switzerland said that an indicative list was not exhaustive.

The EU, supported by Japan, wanted deletion of the words “including, inter alia” and to have this replaced with “such as”, indicating a restrictive and narrow approach in defining the priority areas of focus.

The US was opposed to having “sustainable consumption and production” and “equity” as priorities and wanted these deleted. The EU and Republic of Korea (ROK) wanted to also include “decent work” as an issue of priority.

In response to the developed countries listing their priority areas of focus, the G77 said that this seemed like deciding “how to dress up (the SDGs) and in what brand – whether to wear an ‘Armani, or H&M’”, saying that there were 25 thematic areas and cross sectoral issues under chapter 5A (of the outcome document) and a listing of priorities at this stage would have risks for the negotiations.”

Following the discussions and a proposal by the facilitator of the splinter group (on SDGs), the final text (2 June) reads:

“SDG 5. We also recognize that the goals should address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development. We also underscore 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 development priorities and respecting national policies and priorities. Implementation should be driven by governments with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate [agreed ad ref].

[SDG 5 bis. We also recognize that the [goals / **SDGs – EU**] should address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development [including / **which could include –Canada / such as –EU, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, Norway**][, inter alia – EU, Japan delete], energy, water, food security [, / **and –US**] oceans [and sustainable consumption and production – US delete] as well as cross-cutting issues like [equity and –US delete] social inclusion, [**decent work, –EU, ROK**] rule of law and good governance, gender equality and women’s empowerment. –US reserves; G77 delete para; Norway retain]”

Process to develop the SDGs

As regards the process to develop the SDGs, the Co-chairs in their 22 May text made the following proposal, which involves the UN Secretary-General (SG):

“SDG 6. We reiterate our request to the Secretary-General to make recommendations in his annual reports for further steps to realize the United Nations Development Agenda beyond 2015. We further request the Secretary-General to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in the United Nations Development Agenda beyond 2015 and establish a coordinated process with a view to establishing a set of coherent global goals in 2015. This process should be a country-driven process guided by the General Assembly and be inclusive, transparent, open to participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the UN System, and draw on relevant expert advice and science based evidence. We also propose that any SDGs be agreed by the UN General Assembly.”

The G77 stressed the importance of an intergovernmental process under the General Assembly and was not amenable to any process given to any office or agency. It is the governments who should elaborate

the process, said the G77. In this regard, the G77 had a counter proposal which reads:

“SDG 6 alt. We agree to establish an intergovernmental process on SDGs under the United Nations General Assembly that is inclusive, transparent and open to all stakeholders. The process needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes considering the post-2015 development agenda.”

This proposal was supported by Turkey but is bracketed, given no support from developed countries.

Canada said that the SG’s office has helped shape a number of processes before, including that of the MDGs. Further, it said that the G77 proposal had no indication as to who could guide the governments. The EU, Norway and Switzerland also asked the G77 for further clarity on the steps involved in the “intergovernmental process” to shape the SDGs.

The G77 explained that its proposal was short on detail and that was deliberate. It did not envisage any oversight and from the start till the end, governments are in the driving seat. It did not think that the General Assembly does not have the ability to develop the framework with the UN agencies as a whole. Options for developing those processes need to be discussed and can be fleshed out further. It wanted the broad involvement of the General Assembly which had capacity to do this.

The facilitator (Barbados), following the discussions said that there was clearly divergence on the vision for the process to develop the SDGs. Developing countries did not want the same process that led to the MDGs. There was need for more detailed discussions in this regard and suggested that the two “competing visions” be set out as separate and distinct options for further negotiations.

Measuring progress towards the SDGs

On the issue of measuring progress towards the SDGs, the Co-chairs in their 22 May text made the following proposal:

“SDG 7. We underline that progress towards the SDGs should be measured by an agreed and appropriate set of indicators and assessed on the basis of specific targets that could be differentiated depending on countries’ levels of development and national specificities.”

The G77 asked for deletion of this paragraph, while the US and Norway preferred “a menu of global indicators” as opposed to “an agreed and appropriate set of indicators”. The US was opposed to having an assessment on the basis of “specific targets that could be differentiated depending on countries’ levels of development and national specificities.”