

Meetings begin in Rio, little hope of completing draft

Rio de Janeiro, 14 June (Meena Raman) – The Rio plus 20 meetings began on 13 June with a brief plenary and a full day of negotiations on outstanding and heavily contested issues.

Negotiators, who at this stage are senior officials from capitals and New York missions, are racing against the clock in a desperate attempt to conclude on the main outcome of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. The three-day Summit-level segment begins on 20 June.

Since almost two thirds of the 80-page draft is still mired in disagreements, no one seriously believes the official preparatory process will resolve the key contested issues, let alone complete the draft.

The first day of the Rio “prepcom” meeting saw a big clash on the technology issue, with developed countries continuing to insist that the term “technology transfer” be removed from the title of the technology section. The US said that technology transfer was not relevant to developing countries’ quest for sustainable development. They also wanted removal of all references to intellectual property rights.

With only two days remaining to finalise the outcome document, a key question being asked in the corridors of the negotiations taking place in Rio de Janeiro is how the Brazilian government, as host of the Summit, will conduct the informal consultations starting 16 June that are expected to produce the final or near-final draft.

Negotiations on the outcome document referred to as the “Future We Want”, began in New York in late January this year and resumed on 13 June in Rio at the 3rd Preparatory Committee meeting, and will conclude on 15 June night, after which Brazil is expected to take over the process in its capacity as Presidency of the Conference.

The preparatory process for producing the outcome document is chaired by two Co-Chairs,

Mr. Kim Sook (Republic of Korea) and Mr. John Ashe (Antigua and Barbuda).

The first day of the Rio “prepcom” meeting saw negotiators involved in many groups according to issues. But the slow pace of progress, evident in previous prepcom meetings in New York, continued, with little progress on key issues that are characterised by a strong North-South divide. Many participants are of the view that the last two negotiating days will not be able to deliver a final outcome document, or even one with just a few brackets for political leaders to resolve.

There will still be four days (16-19 June) between the expected closure of the prepcom talks and the opening of the Summit. The Brazilian government is expected to run the consultations process to finalise the text. How this will be done remains unclear, and is the subject of much speculation. Officials and NGOs alike hope the process will be transparent and inclusive but so far there has been little information. In fact there is still no official word on whether or when the prepcom process will end and if the Brazil-led consultations will take over.

The 3rdPrepcom meeting kicked off on Wednesday, 13 June with a brief opening session with remarks by Mr. Sha Zukang, the Secretary-General of the Rio+20 Conference, urging governments to “drastically accelerate the pace” of the negotiations, saying that they had only “three make-it or break-it days” to do so.

Sha said that now was the time to look at the big picture and to focus on key deliverables which he outlined as follows - Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD); sharing experiences and knowledge of green economy policy options, as tools to advance sustainable development and poverty eradication; and action-oriented outcomes in areas such as energy, water,

oceans, food security, cities, women's empowerment, education and others.

He also stressed the need to make further progress on the means of implementation, reaffirm past commitments and strengthen financing, technology transfer and capacity building in support of sustainable development.

Co-chair Kim Sook then explained to parties the organisation of work for the three days of negotiations, which will be in two working groups. Working group 1 will cover chapters 5 and 6 of the document, (which addresses the framework for action and follow-up with thematic/cross-sectoral issues and areas and SDGs) and means of implementation (finance, access to and transfer of technology, and capacity-building) while working group 2 deals with the remaining chapters 1-4. (These chapters cover the following areas – (1) preamble; (2) renewing political commitment which includes the reaffirming of the Rio principles and past action plans, assessing the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and addressing new and emerging challenges; (3) green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and (4) IFSD.)

Each of the working groups were further organised into “splinter groups” and comprised the following on the first day of the meeting – green economy; IFSD; SDGs and means of implementation; oceans; gender/education/health; cities/transport/mining; sustainable consumption and production, water, climate change; and chemicals/desertification.

The first prepcom day was marked by negotiations in the many groups. A plenary session was held at 8-10 pm to hear reports on progress of work from the group facilitators. At the close of the meeting, Co-Chair John Ashe expressed concerns over the slow pace of work, with a large number of paragraphs remaining to be agreed.

According to people attending the group negotiations, deep divisions remain in many areas of the draft outcome document. Below are highlights of discussions in some of the key issues.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The main focus of the discussions was on the issue of the process to launch the SDGs. There are two divergent positions. The G77 and China wants an intergovernmental process under the General

Assembly while the developed countries prefer a process, which involves the UN Secretary General. Parties explained why they preferred the respective approaches. Efforts were made to find middle ground and a small group has been meeting to find a compromise.

Finance

In the last round of negotiations in New York, developed countries firmly opposed proposals by developing countries calling for the provision of new and additional financial resources to support the various commitments made in the outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference, including the setting up of a sustainable development fund.

The New York meetings saw stiff resistance from the US, Canada, EU to various proposals by developing countries calling on developed countries to provide new and additional resources, to increase official development assistance (ODA), to provide dedicated resources through international financial institutions (IFIs) and to increase resources to the United Nations development system.

This battle continued on the first day of the Rio prepcom.

The US continued to stress the vital role of the private sector investment, saying that direct net investment was USD 390 billion a year whereas ODA is US 130 billion. If there is no balance (implying that the text has to stress important role of non-public funding) then there would be no package.

Pakistan for the G77 and China agreed everything is part of package. However it is vital to find an effective resource mobilisation framework, then all elements of the text can be considered.

Technology development and transfer

The above title of technology section continued to be a source of dispute. The US and EU could not accept the term “transfer” in the title. They insisted on removing “transfer” from the title and adding innovation and research. The US said “technology transfer” is not about sustainable development. Instead it stressed the importance of innovation. It was only agreeable to “voluntary” transfer on “mutually agreed terms”.

The G77 stressed that the existing framework has not delivered and there was need to look at new ways of working. Technology transfer is very important for developing countries and referred to

Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan on Implementation (on commitments on technology transfer) and suggested that a solution would be to take language from these. It said that a focus on innovation alone is insufficient and technology diffusion is also important. It wanted institutional mechanisms to enable technology transfer. It also stressed the need to consider existing and new flexibilities in relation to the intellectual property rights regime.

The US, Canada and Japan were adamant in opposing paragraphs and references to considering an international technology mechanism. The US also opposed the facilitator's suggestion to merge two paragraphs dealing with a proposed technology mechanism since major developed countries had wanted to delete both paragraphs.

The US in response to the G77 references to Agenda 21 and JPOI said that the world had changed in the last 20 years and countries should not be looking backwards. What was in the Agenda 21 text (on technology) is no longer true. It said fresh thinking is needed.

The US, EU, Japan, Canada and other developed countries also did not want any consideration of flexibilities in the IPR regime. The US said that the IPR issue is a matter for other specialised agencies like WIPO to take up, and involved other treaties, and the Rio+20 conference was not the right forum.

It is obvious there is deep clash in frameworks and paradigms on the technology issue.