

## **Rubble from Rio+20; making sense of a failed summit**

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The Rio +20 Summit came to a close on 22<sup>nd</sup> June with hundreds of the heads of the state appreciating the efforts of the hosts in creating consensus on an outcome document titled “the future we want,” after months of intense and often acrimonious negotiations. The President of Brazil Ms. Dilma Rousseff, in her closing speech cautiously described the event as “a starting point.” The other dignitaries described the outcome as “balanced” where all the countries had something close to their hearts. The EU Climate Commissioner Ms. Connie Hedegaard also made a tongue in cheek remark (in a brief meeting with the author), “of having placed hooks at the right places, which will not be easy to dismantle.” However, except for diplomats who are trained in the art of verbal dexterity, many others were not so discreet in their judgment about the near total failure of the Summit. Kumi Naidoo from Greenpeace, said that the outcome document was the longest suicide note. As a matter of fact, the Summit and the outcome document, acknowledged the urgency and need for action on all three pillars economic, environmental and social, but it did not go any further. In the end “ the future we want” remained an opulent verbosity with no commitments. While the political leaders are happy to have salvaged the Summit; the people share an agonizing frustration over an opportunity wasted and sense of disbelief in multilateralism to deliver. Let’s ponder over few important issues and outcomes from the summit.

**Poverty eradication:** The outcome document identifies poverty eradication as a major challenge that the world faces today and renews political commitment to address it. It is in fact highly shameful that more than one sixth of the humanity still lives in abject poverty, more than 1 billion people without access to food, and 1.4 billion people without access to electricity, which has a key role in poverty reduction. The Para 2 of Our Common Vision declares “eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. In this regard we are committed to freeing humanity from poverty and hunger as a matter of urgency.” Though the outcome document does not go beyond acknowledging poverty as a major challenge, its recognition itself is very important in keeping poverty eradication on the political agenda, not only in the developing countries, but also serving as stark reminder to the developed and rich countries of their responsibility in lending a helping hand to lift half of world population out of poverty.

**Reaffirmation of Rio Principles and CBDR;** Despite stiff resistance from the rich countries to keep the CBDR out of the document, developing countries solidarity could pull this off. The outcome document makes two references to the CBDR, the text in Reaffirming the Rio Principles and past action plans, and in the text on climate change. This is of extreme significance, as in the Durban, developing countries have carelessly bartered this away, and it was believed that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to bring this in due to extreme abhorrence of the US with the phrase. Though developing countries failed to bring CBDR in the language in the finance and technology transfer, in the chapter

on means of implementation, nonetheless existence of CBDR and reaffirmation to Rio principles and climate change (in key thematic areas) is enough reminder to the rich countries of their historical role and impending responsibility to provide leadership in climate stabilization efforts.

**Phasing out fossil fuel subsidies;** The commitment to phase out fossil fuel subsidies can be the most remarkable outcome of the Summit, if the world leaders remain true to their words. It can definitely be a major take away from the Rio+20. More than 1 trillion of the USD is given to dirty energy companies, which is the major impediment to development of responsible and renewable energy choices. However, there is nothing to be very enthusiastic about the phasing out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies. The G 20 summit in Pittsburgh (2009) committed to phase out fossil fuel subsidies, and every G8, and G20 summits hence have reiterated this commitment, however, very little action has reached the ground. As a matter of fact, high secrecy still envelopes fossil fuel subsidies and the ways in which it is given, with few countries like the UK and Japan outrightly reject existence of these subsidies in their countries. Greater transparency and political will have to precede if governments are serious about actual reduction in subsidies.

**Programme on sustainable consumption and production (SCP):** The outcome text commits to undertake a 10-year framework of programmes on SCP. It can be extremely helpful in building capacity of business, communities and households on understanding and moving towards sustainable and responsible production and consumption patterns respecting the carrying capacity of the earth. In the current consumption patterns, global use of resources is likely to quadruple in 20 years. SCP has been on the international agenda since Agenda 21 (1992) identified unsustainable production and consumption patterns as the major cause for continued deterioration of the global environment. The JPOI adopted at the WSSD, Johannesburg (2002), adopted a ten-year framework of programmes in support of national and regional initiatives to accelerate the shift towards consumption and production patterns. UNEP launched the Marrakech process in 2003 and has since then convened three meetings. Rio+20 did nothing more than to agree to the adoption of a 10 YFP in the pursuance of process launched after the WSSD.

**Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Initially proposed by Columbia, and supported by Guatemala, SDGs were seen as the most tangible outcome from the Summit. While most of the countries seem to be agreeable to the concept of the SDGs, sharp differences existed on approach, content and implementation. The EU support for defining SDGs notwithstanding, the final document desisted from giving it a final shape and said " 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....."(Para 248). It also committed to set up a thirty member working group in the 67<sup>th</sup> session of the UNGA and will submit a report to the 68<sup>th</sup> session, containing a proposal for sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action. (Para 248)

**Green Economy:** Vaguely defined concept of green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, one of the two themes of the Summit, was hotly contested, with many rich countries trying to push an action plan on green economy, and developing countries fearing a blanket green economy framework restricting their right to development. Unflinching stance of G77 and China, in demanding Green Economy as a tool won the day, with Green economy being referred to as “green economy policies”, or “policies for green economy”, rather than “a green economy.” The text mentions “we affirm that there are different approaches, visions, models, and tools available to each country, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities, to achieve sustainable development in its three dimensions, which is our over arching goal. In this regard we consider green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication as one of important tools available for achieving sustainable development and that it could provide options for policymaking but should not be a rigid set of rules.....”(Para 56). Removal of the vowel was widely celebrated in the Indian camp as victory on the last frontier.

**Institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD);** Global environmental governance has been the weakest link in the sustainable development, and the Summit could have been a landmark event to strengthen it, make it more transparent and accountable, but it chose to do it in the weakest possible manner. From amongst the options proposed, consensus could be created on scaling up UNEP with universal membership and the finances. Aspirations of African group to make UNEP a specialized UN agency (which has greater clout) could not be realized and UNEP still remains an institution. The other proposal to form a Sustainable Development Council (SDC) on the lines of Human Rights Council, was transformed into setting up of a high level political forum, to take over from UNCSD. The General Assembly will define the format and organizational aspects of the HLF and will convene the first forum in 68<sup>th</sup> Session.

### **What Rio+20 failed to deliver**

The zero draft was seen as a very weak and unambitious document from the beginning and there were several calls from developing countries to focus on root cause of unsustainable development namely, reform in global financial architecture and role of IFIs, technology transfer, reform in trade framework including making IPR restrictions flexible so that they can access and use green technologies, and strengthening the means of implementation to support their transition to a green and clean future. However, developed countries failed to raise the level of ambitions and provide additional finance or technology.

**There is no money honey;** The G77 and China had proposed setting up a sustainable development fund of 30 billion USD by 2013 to be scaled up to 100 billion USD by 2015. It was based on an old UNEP proposal made in 1992. However, developed countries completely refused to provide any new and additional finance saying that Rio+20 was a not a “pledging moment” and countries should “look forward rather than backwards.” They also suggested that

most of the finances required will have to come through innovative finances, which literally means from market mechanisms and public private partnerships. South South cooperation and triangular cooperation are proposed to complement (read replace) north south cooperation. A compromise between the warring blocks (North and south) was reached by a proposal to set up a 30 member expert committee to assess financial needs, which will complete its work by 2014. The Summit also urged the developed countries to ensure (Monterrey consensus) providing 0.7 % of the GNP to developing countries and 0.15-0.20% to the LDCs. The timing of the Summit when the Europe and the United states are fighting with continued economic recession too, did not augur well for the developing countries.

**Summit trips on Technology transfer and IPR:** Developed countries not only failed to provide much needed additional financial support, but also did a *volte-face* with regard to technology transfer. The developed countries are so much averse to the term technology transfer so that the title "technology transfer" was replaced by "technology," and "technology transfer" was referred to as "technology transfer..... on favorable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed." The references to IPR were altogether removed from the final text.

**Key thematic areas; recognition of challenges but not rights:** The outcome document also recognized 30 key thematic areas for further action and follow up such as poverty eradication, food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture, water and sanitation, energy, sustainable tourism, sustainable transport, sustainable cities and human settlements, health and population, promoting full and productive employment, decent work for all and social protection, oceans and seas, small island developing states (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Land Locked Developing Countries (LLDCs), Africa, regional efforts, Disaster Risk Reduction, climate change, forests, biodiversity, desertification, land degradation and drought, mountains, chemicals and wastes, sustainable consumption and production, mining, education, and gender equality and empowerment of women. While they acknowledge the problems and challenges, and encourage action, there are no real commitments. While many alleged that the rights components have been further weakened in the final document, perhaps oceans and SIDS, received best possible treatment in terms of unambiguous language, bringing out clearly that business as usual is not the option.

## **Developing countries and Rio+20**

The developing countries largely welcomed the document, even though they complained of lack of resources and technology for shift to green economy. Many of the developing countries wanted flexibility in defining green economy and SDGs, which has been left open enough for their own interpretations and definitions depending on their national circumstances, priorities and policies. This flexibility can be used well and also abused. The flexibility might allow the governments to get off the hook and get away with doing nothing new and continuing in business as usual approach. Many developing countries do have a

track record of favoring the latter. BASIC countries too need to provide some real leadership and practice at home what they preach in big summits. Brazil has been under scanner as being the host of the summit. A world leader in clean energy with high hydropower production capacity and high ethanol production, Brazil set up a new climate regime in 2009 with voluntary national GHG reduction target between 36 to 39 percent. More recently, it has announced lowest deforestation rates, however, enhanced action is required as forest data predicts increased deforestation due to change in country's forest code. South Africa has provided leadership to the African Union on climate change and sustainable development issues. However, the most remarkable outcome of the COP 17 hosted by the South Africa, was its fascination with "climate smart agriculture" under pressure from the World Bank, FAO, and industrial agriculture countries including the US, New Zealand, Canada and Australia. South Africa's penchant for climate smart agriculture, which is a package of false solutions and agribusiness agenda, not only threatens food security and small, traditional and family farmers in the country but entire African continent undergoing second colonization through massive land grabs under the guise of responsible investment in agriculture in Africa. China and India have been perceived as blockers of Summits of late, have much to prove at home for their leadership in the developing world. China is an emerging giant in renewable energy, however, its investment in renewable energy is still dwarfed by its investment in dirty coal fire powered plants. Last but not the least in the league, India, even with three times increase in installed power capacity within the last three decades, it has failed to provide significant energy access to more than half of the population. Its continued dependence on coal, 10 proposed super critical ultra mega thermal power projects (4000 MW each approx), and fixation with nuclear energy continues to threaten millions of people with displacement, loss of livelihoods, forests and biodiversity. The lesson for them is to put their own house in order first.

Concluded

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