

EDITORIAL

We had planned to write an in-depth commentary on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD (Rio+20)) and reprint the full text of the outcome¹ in our Selected Documents section. However, considering the diversity of subjects and in the interest of conveying a neutral position, we would like provide you with an initial insight into the opinions expressed, followed by our short reflection:

Among the opinions expressed in the Conference:

- United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon at first criticised the final negotiating text as not very ambitious, noting that he expected an historical agreement. Upon adoption of the outcome document, however, he called it an important victory for multilateralism and a firm foundation for building a sustainable future;
- Sha Zukang, Secretary-General of the Conference, even admitted that it is a result that doesn't make anyone happy and it was also his job to make everyone comparably unhappy;
- Luiz Alberto Figueiredo, Head of the Brazilian negotiating team, expressed that those not putting money on the table, while asking for ambitious activities, are incoherent;
- Dirk Niebel, German Minister for Economic Cooperation, said he wished that two to three of the top themes had been transferred to Heads of State and Government for actual negotiation, while the German Environment Minister, Peter Altmaier, said that the outcome is anything but poor quality;
- The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (ETC Group) noted that many delegations are genuinely embarrassed by the title of the outcome document, which sets sights on a future that can't be achieved by the haplessly shortsighted initiatives proposed;
- Marcelo Furtado of Greenpeace Brazil expressed that the outcome was nothing but promises and hot air;
- Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for the Environment, called for recognition that Rio+20 is just the beginning of a range of activities that will lead us to the desired results;
- The Right Livelihood Award ('Alternative Nobel Prize') Laureate, Vandana Shiva, said that the result was irresponsible and allowed the governments to justify their inactivity;
- The German Federal Association of Industry sees good intentions for an increased “greening” of the world;
- Individual Members of the European Parliament stated the opinion that political leaders need to find the courage to tell their citizens what needs to be done...not the other way around;
- A representative of Bread for the World commented that if one government were honest about what has to be done they could not agree with the outcome;
- The Vice President of the German League for Nature and Environment – representing more than 100 conservation organisations – said that the outcome was “not the future we want”;
- Cama Tuiloma, Ambassador of the Fiji Islands to Brazil, bemoaned that all the hard work was for nothing;
- Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), said he believes in a green economy and a Sustainability Index looking beyond GDP as a new model for the economic system of the 21st Century;
- A coalition of environmental institutes expressed the predicament of green growth as having the potential to destroy the headway made over the last 20 years;
- German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, commented that the results are less than expected and less than what is needed. She added, however, that although the EU and Germany asked for more binding expressions, the multilateralism of the Conference again emphasised a key point – that “we are not alone in the world”;
- The statement on behalf of the G-77/China said that the document is the “optimum outcome possible”;
- Bolivia underlined the continued importance of recognising “Mother Earth”, the rights of nature, and different models of development in order to avoid becoming imprisoned in a monocultural model that has been called “green economy”;
- The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) noted the special significance of the 1992 Earth Summit (UNCED) for recognition of the vulnerabilities of small islands, and said the real work now lies in implementation of commitments and agreements.

One point of contention related to the process by which the output document, entitled “The Future we Want”, was finalised. Connected to this, the President of one State, asking not to be named, said that the United Nations made a fundamental mistake declaring negotiations closed one day prior to the formal opening of the conference without the formal blessing of Heads of State and Government. Several other participating ministers expressed their regret that they had been given no chance during the Conference to provide input and amendments to the final document. One delegate didn't believe that the Conference had produced anything to be proud of, since so many key decisions had only been postponed. In another statement, however, a silver lining is visible: The director of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund reflected that those impatient with the formal process, from businesses, individual governments, NGOs, communities and people's movements had banded together at Rio in thousands of ways to catalyse action outside the multilateral process.

In other formal statements of national positions, specific concerns were identified:

- **Cuba** acknowledged discontent at the dilution of developed country responsibilities;
- The **US** expressed disappointment at the absence of priority themes for the Sustainable Development Goals;
- **Egypt**, speaking for the Arab Group, said that the balance in the outcome preserved multilateralism at a delicate moment, and all should stick to it and move on;

1 “The future we want”, Document A/CONF.216/L.1online at: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/thefuturewewant.html>.

- **Japan** expressed it was ready to follow up the document with concrete actions, including on the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for eradication of poverty;
- Some States, as well as the **EU**, said the document could have been better in a number of ways, for example, by including a reference to a United Nations Environment Organization;
- **Mexico** stated that the document’s incorporation of a social dimension into sustainable development is an important achievement;
- **Nigeria** thanked Brazil for restoring faith in multilateral negotiations and for saving incoming ministers from protracted negotiations.

Individuals and organisational delegates seated to represent the following other major groups identified key issues that needed to be addressed:

- **Women:** Representatives noted a lack of commitment to reproductive rights, a high commissioner for future generations and recognition of the destruction caused by nuclear energy and mining;
- **Children and Youth:** Their spokesperson noted particular “red lines” that were not addressed, including recognition of planetary boundaries, designation of a high commissioner for youth, and declaration of rights to food, water and health;
- **Indigenous Peoples:** The return to dialogue in harmony with Mother Earth, adopting a new paradigm of living well, recognising culture as a dimension of sustainable development;
- **Other NGOs:** Interventions stated that the document falls short by not mentioning planetary boundaries, tipping points and earth’s carrying capacity. Furthermore, they came forward with a statement entitled “The Future We Do Not Want” saying the document is “out of touch with reality” while not taking into account the challenges of the global economic crisis;
- **Local Authorities:** A statement on behalf of this group stressed the need for multi-level governance for sustainable development, and a new urban agenda embodying territorial cohesion and regionalisation;
- **Workers and Trade Unions:** Delegates pointed to the “decent work agenda”, and the need to “build bridges” with environmental policies;
- **Business and Industry:** Representatives acknowledged that the commercial sectors will continue to bring solutions to the market for inclusive and green growth and that governments should promote policy frameworks;
- **Science and Technological Community:** Speakers authorised under this category underscored that we have entered the Anthropocene Era and called for Rio+20 to forge a new contract with the science and policy community;
- **Farmers:** Agricultural statements stressed the need to put food sovereignty at the centre of sustainability... “no farmers, no food, no future”.

To one reading these comments, this list may give the impression that Rio+20 did not result in the historical result that Ban Ki-Moon expected. Indeed, the negotiators have agreed on a “safe” text, rather than a progressive one. We do not, however, join with those who (elsewhere) have stated that the outcome isn’t worth the paper it is printed on, because there is one thing on which we all agree: that the basic issues of environment and sustainable development are urgent. We can now hope that implementation of the calls for action throughout the document does not take too long and that the many details remaining to be worked out are able to find compromise amongst States under the auspices of the United Nations.

This is especially desirable in regards to the document’s provisions for an institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD) and a strengthened role for UNEP. When we began to conceptualise the Programme during the Stockholm Conference, “catalytic” was the word that defined its competence. It can be argued that this mandate has strongly inhibited the activities of UNEP since its inception and that the term is even a “nightmare” when seeking to be more “operative” and allow for funding and implementation on the ground. Conversely, the respective section of the Rio+20 outcome document now gives the impression that the present generation of decision makers has fully forgotten, never heard of, or tucked this terminology away. Aside from the welcome exception made over the years for building national capacities in environmental law, I am sure that I am not the only one who hopes that Rio+20 has made the term “catalytic” obsolete.

We were certainly hoping for more than a “better-than-nothing outcome”. Nor did we welcome the creation of an invitation for further negotiations. However, one has to realise that a compromise between 193 States with varying economic and political structures is naturally difficult to fit into one neat package. With the conclusion of Rio+20, these countries now have the opportunity to begin the work on a different scale – to wrap up a number of smaller parcels, while monitoring and ensuring that the voluntary commitments are fulfilled. A lot can be achieved with the more than US\$500 billion that was pledged!

This leads us to contemplate the practicality of such large conferences drawing thousands of participants. The UN proudly declared Rio+20 the largest conference it had ever held, but perhaps greater returns are to be realised through smaller theme-specific meetings with the necessary experts and lower expectations.

Now, the result moves on to New York where the United Nations General Assembly has to rely on ECOSOC² and its Committees to prepare implementable resolutions. The final outcome of Rio+20 will therefore be seen once the 67th session confronts its task and hopefully decides on the future we all want.

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Participants at Rio+20 produced approximately 60 tons of garbage.

4 July 2012

- Wolfgang B. Semy -

2 ECOSOC Substantive Session information is available online at <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/substantive2012/julyhls/g2012.shtml>.