Rio+20 Commentary

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Rio+20: observations and what is next?

<Key points>

• The result of Rio+20 is mixed; some modest outcome achieved, but many shortcomings in the entire process have been received.

• Some achievements were made, including introducing universal membership for UNEP’s Governing Council, transforming CSD into a High Level Political Forum, and starting SDGs process through a so-called Open Working Group with 30 representatives.

• The lack of clarity in the process regarding roles and responsibilities of Rio+20 Secretariat and the host country caused last-minute confusion in the negotiations and the adoption of a “disagreed” text.

• While a new sustainable development framework has been successfully outlined by this Conference, it could have achieved more only if the review of implementation gap had been conducted more in advance, and the themes had been decided based upon its comprehensive analysis.

• Rio+20’s result mirrors the difference in global power architecture since the Rio Summit in 1992, as only the French president among G8 countries came to Rio, but all the BRICS countries’ Heads of the State came this time.

• However, the Conference was the starting point for change, not the end of history. It is time for us to take actions.

The long two-year process of Rio+20 ended last week on 22 June with the adoption of the outcome document, the so-called The Future We Want. The result is mixed.

Negotiations prior to the Conference made little progress and many of the same issues were roadblocks, such as the reference to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), definition of green economy, options for reforming UNEP, whether to start SDGs with a clear process or clear themes, and funding for capacity development. As a result, Brazil took on an unprecedentedly strong leadership role and provided a non-negotiable text late in the evening of 17 June. Member States were asked to only state the “red line” issues which they absolutely could not

1 “Red line” issues mean some contentious issues that government representatives in Rio by themselves could not accept, having had no time to consult with top officials in their home countries.
accept; after some closed-door discussions and revisions, and with some reservations, the Brazilian revised document was adopted on 19 June with many disagreed points. Some delegates complained about Brazil’s late leadership saying that they could have taken this sort of action back in March. Others said that this was Brazil’s strategy to exhaust delegates and make them adopt the outcome document even without full agreement. These two theories highlight the lack of clarity in the process regarding roles and responsibilities.

In the Plenary from 20-22 June, the Heads of State and High-Level Representatives stated their positions and initiatives regardless of what would be written in the outcome document. Most developing countries still expressed their concerns about green economy and strong support of CBDR. On the other hand, developed countries such as US, EU, Japan and others appealed to developing countries by stating their new and continued commitment to financial contribution and their own initiatives.

As a result, some achievements were made, including introducing universal membership for UNEP’s Governing Council, transforming CSD into a High Level Political Forum, and starting SDGs process through a so-called Open Working Group with 30 representatives. There are different views on this achievement. Some were more positive as the Conference could have failed without these achievements, whereas others argue that it is a failure without any concrete targets and actions stated, again highlighting the unclear nature of the purpose and expectations for the Conference. In parallel, an estimated 500 on-site side events as well as 3,000 unofficial events were held, and about 700 voluntary commitments for actions to implement the conference’s goals have been received. However, side events were too many to capture the essence of the key collective messages for Rio+20 and whether these voluntary commitments are new is another question.

Rio+20’s result mirrors the difference in global power architecture since the Rio Summit in 1992. Among the G8 countries, only the French president came to Rio, but all the BRICS countries’ Heads of the State came this time. This symbolises the power shift and priorities in term of decreasing leadership of developed countries, but increasing global presence of emerging countries. Whether the Conference achieved its main objective to assess the implementation gap and reaffirm the political commitment for sustainable development is another question. All the stakeholders were asked to review their efforts to sustainable development after the Rio+20 themes were decided in the autumn of 2010. This means that the themes were not decided based on the comprehensive review of the past efforts, but “seem” to be top-down decisions by the UN. This caused concern among developing countries towards green economy and generated little interest among the general public in IFSD. While a new sustainable development framework has been successfully outlined by this
Conference, it could have achieved more only if the review of implementation gap had been conducted more in advance, and the themes had been decided based upon its comprehensive analysis.

BUT, I agree with other positive thinkers that the Conference was the starting point for change, not the end of history. Appropriately following up the official processes and actions adopted at Rio+20, ensuring implementation of voluntary commitments submitted, accelerating each stakeholder’s voluntary actions for achieving sustainable development are the crucial steps for creating the genuine “future we want.”