

## Rich nations backtracking on the road to Rio Summit

Rio de Janeiro, 13 June (Martin Khor) – As we enter the final stretch to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, the countries are still far from agreeing on what to say in a summit declaration or plan of action.

The final meeting to prepare for the Conference on 29 May to 2 June at the UN headquarters in New York made some progress to narrow the gaps, but it was not enough.

Only 70 paragraphs out of a total of 329 in the latest draft declaration have been agreed on. There are differing views in the rest, which have to be bridged when the delegates meet again on 13 June in Rio.

They have a few days to do so before the political leaders meet on 20-23 June for what is dubbed as the Rio Plus 20 summit, so called because it is marking the twentieth anniversary of the historic Earth Summit of 1992, also held in Rio.

More than a hundred heads of state or governments are expected to attend Rio + 20, making it the most important international conference this year.

It will be held amidst a global financial crisis, growing unemployment, and worsening environmental problems, including increasing water scarcity and floods, biodiversity loss, food insecurity and climate change.

These are all part of the crisis in sustainable development and its three dimensions—economic, social and environment.

Unfortunately, the summit comes at a time when developed and developing countries seem less and less able to reach a common understanding on key issues and principles.

The North-South divide has been visible in the negotiations at the World Trade Organisation, in the Climate Change Convention and most recently at the UN Conference on Trade and Development.

The same divide also exists in the Rio+20 negotiations.

Big differences have emerged on the three new issues being addressed by the Conference -- the concept of the green economy, how to define sustainable development goals, and what new institutional framework to create to house future activities on sustainable development.

But what is even more worrying is that the developed countries are attempting to remove or dilute the principles agreed to in Rio 20 years ago, and to backtrack on the commitments they had made to assist developing countries through finance and technology transfer in order to implement sustainable development.

Thus the North-South divide is not only over specific issues but is also at the deep level of the fundamentals that lie at the foundations of international cooperation of the past many decades.

These include the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), and the commitments on technology transfer and finance.

The CBDR was one of the Rio Principles adopted in 1992. It was agreed that all countries have a common responsibility to protect the environment, but also differentiated responsibilities because the rich countries should play the leading role, due to their greater contribution to the environmental crisis and their higher economic status.

This basic principle is under attack. In the recent negotiations, the United States has made it clear it cannot accept CBDR. Wherever the term is mentioned, the US wants it deleted.

Almost all developed countries use the excuse that no single Rio principle should be singled out and a general reference to the set of Rio principles should suffice.

This is causing great concern to the developing

countries, grouped in the G77 and China. For them, the clear reaffirmation of the CBDR principle in particular and the Rio principles in general is the most important point that Rio+20 must proclaim. Otherwise it would be a great retreat from the original Rio.

The second serious problem is the developed countries' back-tracking on their commitment to transfer technology to developing countries.

In the section on technology transfer in the draft declaration, the US, European Union, Canada and Australia do not even want any reference to technology transfer in the title itself.

The original title in the text by the Co-Chairs of the meeting was "Technology development and transfer." The US, supported by Canada and Australia, want to delete the word "transfer" and instead change the title to "Technology development, innovation and science".

The EU also wants a new title: "Research, Innovation and Technology Development." This is the clearest indication of an intention to kill the concept, let alone the commitment to, Technology Transfer.

Wherever the words "technology transfer" appear, there is an attempt by the US (supported by Canada) to put in the words "voluntary transfer on mutually agreed terms and conditions".

This is backtracking from the previous commitment by developed countries. In the 1992 Rio Summit and in the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 (that focused on implementation) and in other fora, the developed countries had agreed not only to technology transfer without restricting the term, but also to technology transfer on "concessional and preferential terms", or to "fair and most favourable terms."

In one part of the original text calling for enhanced access by developing countries for environmentally sound technologies, one developed country even proposed changing the meaning to enhanced market access to developing countries' markets for the developed countries' technologies.

The major developed countries also want to delete entire paragraphs that call for a balanced treatment of intellectual property rights. For example, the Co-Chairs (John Ashe of Antigua and Barbuda and Kim Sook of the Republic of Korea) proposed that the impact of patents on developing countries' access to technology be examined, but this was rejected by almost all developed countries.

On the issue of financial assistance to developing countries, the developed countries are resisting the concept of new and additional funds (also previously agreed to), or any concrete figures or mechanisms.

For example, the Co-Chairs proposed that, "We recognise the crucial importance of increases in the provision of finance for sustainable development". But Canada, the US and New Zealand wanted to delete "increases in the provision."

The draft also urges developed countries to make additional concrete efforts towards the target of providing aid equivalent to 0.7 per cent of their GNP, which had been in the original Rio action plan. But Canada and the US want to delete this as they said they have never agreed to this target.

There is an attempt to significantly water down the role of public finance in financial transfers to developing countries and shift this to private financing or even to South-South financing.

The G77 and China proposed that developed countries provide new funding for sustainable development in developing countries exceeding US\$30 billion a year in 2013-17 and US\$100 billion a year from 2018 onwards, and to set up a sustainable development fund.

In fact this is not a new idea, as the UN secretariat back in 1992 had estimated that developed countries should provide US\$100 billion a year to developing countries to implement the proposed sustainable development actions.

However, in the discussions in the last informal negotiations session in New York, several developed countries objected to the mention of concrete funding figures and to the idea of a fund.

There is an air of despondency among developing country delegates, due to the trend in the recent negotiations. As one delegate put it at the end of the last session, the developing countries are being asked to take on more obligations through the concepts of the green economy and sustainable development goals, but there are no new funds to assist them, and there is a backtracking on the technology transfer commitment.

However there are still some negotiating days ahead, and there is a slim chance that there may be a change of heart at Rio itself.

(Martin Khor is Executive Director of South Centre.)