


Deadlock over Rio+20 action plan fuels NGO scepticism about summit's payoff

Fortnight of inconclusive UN preparatory committee talks leaves delegates frustrated and raises doubts about Rio+20's outcomes

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Article history



As negotiators struggle to set the agenda for the Rio+20 summit, activists have criticised what they call 'green capitalism'. Photograph: Clarinha Glock/IPS

After two weeks of closed-door negotiations, the UN preparatory committee PrepCom has failed to reach consensus on a global plan of action, entitled The Future We Want, to be adopted at the Rio+20 summit meeting of world leaders in Brazil next month.

The negotiators, comprising representatives of all 193 member states, had limited success beyond reducing the size of the action plan, or

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outcome document", from nearly 200 to fewer than 100 pages. The document, called the "zero draft", originally ran to more than 6,000 pages of submissions by member states, international organisations and civil society groups.

Kim Sook, the South Korean ambassador to the UN and one of the co-chairs of the PrepCom, said delegates had expressed "disappointment and frustration at the lack of progress" on agreeing a plan aimed at a greener economy and a sustainable future.

In an effort to break the deadlock, the PrepCom will revisit the zero draft at an unscheduled five-day session beginning on 29 May. The draft action plan has to be ready for approval by the time world leaders arrive in Rio de Janeiro for the three-day UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), or Rio+20 summit, starting on 20 June.

If the PrepCom fails to reach consensus, negotiations will resume in Brazil on 13 June in a three-day, do-or-die attempt to finalise the document.

The summit will be a follow-up to the landmark 1992 Earth summit in Brazil, which adopted Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

"Let us be frank," the UNCSD secretary general Sha Zukang said, "the negotiating text is a far cry from the focused political document called for by the general assembly." Zukang said the objective should be to arrive in Rio "with at least 90% of the text ready, and only the most difficult 10% left to be negotiated there at the highest political levels".

However, a [statement released](#) by a coalition of international NGOs warned that Rio+20 "looks set to add almost nothing to global efforts to deliver sustainable development". "Too many governments are using or allowing the talks to undermine established human rights and agreed principles such as equity, precaution and polluter pays," it said.

Antonio Hill of Oxfam said: "After four months of talks on the so-called zero draft outcome document, the Rio+20 talks are stuck at zero." He added that little or nothing has emerged that will deliver what governments agreed was needed 20 years ago at the Earth summit.



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Besides Oxfam, the coalition includes Development Alternatives, Greenpeace, the Forum of Brazilian NGOs and Social Movements for Environment and Development (FBOMS), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Vitae Civilis.

Asked about the sticking points in the negotiating process, Zeenat Niazi, senior programme director at the India-based Development Alternatives Group, told IPS there was disagreement over the concept of green economy and "its relevance and meaning to the global south".

She pointed out other areas of disagreement, including: issues of equity; sustainable consumption and production in the global north; social justice, especially related to resource extraction from developing and least-developed countries; and technology transfer and trade.

Additionally, there were disputes relating to sustainable development goals (SDGs) and how they deal with "the integration across the three pillars of sustainability, and not becoming a long laundry list". "And what kind of commitments will nations need to make, and the readiness for them, and the building up of national capacities to facilitate the inclusion of SDGs in national development plans and priorities?" asked Niazi.

Asked whether an additional week of negotiations will make any significant difference to the outcome document, Niazi told IPS: "It could, if there are spaces created to include the voices of civil society, and integrate the same in the outcome document and outline an inclusive road map to design the post-Rio+20 action plans."

In a [statement](#), the UN identified some of the contentious issues preventing agreement on the outcome document. Some developed countries, the statement said, have embraced the green economy as a new roadmap for sustainable development, while many developing countries are more cautious, asserting that each country should choose its own path to a sustainable future and that a green economy approach should not lead to green protectionism or limit growth and poverty eradication.

Other countries and stakeholders, it said, have voiced concerns about implementation and accountability, pointing out that some commitments made at previous global meetings, such as for official development

assistance (ODA), have yet to be fully realised.

Nonetheless, said the statement, virtually all countries appear willing to agree on a number of issues, including the overall need to recognise and act to meet pressing global and national challenges.

"It has been widely acknowledged that action is needed to provide for the needs of a growing global population that continues to consume and produce unsustainably, resulting in rising carbon emissions, degraded natural ecosystems and growing income inequality."

The need to find a better measurement of progress than gross domestic product has also been widely acknowledged. The statement added that countries have also been examining the concept of new SDGs, a set of benchmarks to guide them in achieving targeted outcomes within a specific time period, such as access to sustainable energy and clean water for all.

But some countries have differing views on what should or should not be included in the goals, as well as the formal process for how and when the goals may be defined, finalised and agreed upon.