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PROFILE

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20): A sign of the times or ‘ecology as spectacle’?

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The role of mega-conferences

The June 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD or Rio+20) was the latest international community effort to deal holistically with global environmental issues. The 1992 Earth Summit (UNCED) channelled mounting concern within the scientific community and emerging global civil society. Their demands for an invigorated global response to escalating environmental and developmental crises paved the way for the adoption of Agenda 21 and three major legally binding international agreements on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification. Despite the euphoria of the time, the failure of subsequent high-profile mega-conferences to set the world onto a more sustainable path of development, coupled with the stalled attempts to address climate change, have raised doubts about the expectations of such mega-events.

Death (2011, p. 1) reduces summits that fail to result in concrete action and strengthen environmental regimes to mere ‘moments of political theatre’, arguing that such forums as the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference simply function as means through which political elites enact symbolic performances aimed at reassuring the global audience of the utmost seriousness with which environmental sustainability concerns are treated. Doran (1993), commenting on the 1992 Earth Summit, argued that summitry can serve as a sophisticated form of institutional denial in the face of the unprecedented challenge to the dominant development model.

Falkner (2012) is more optimistic, arguing that focusing solely on the shortcomings of UN environmental summitry risks overlooking profound normative transformations in international relations. Mega-conferences are simply a manifestation of the manner in which the ideas and values of global environmentalism have been firmly integrated into contemporary economic thinking and practice, thus gradually ‘greening international society’ over time (Falkner 2012, p. 521). Indeed, one might contend that disappointment with Rio+20 reflects expectations

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heightened by the penetration of the sustainable development discourse since 1992.

The Rio+20 meeting largely passed below the radar. Despite numbers of delegates on the scale of Copenhagen in 2009, major world leaders were conspicuous by their absence. No new international treaties were signed or binding pledges of any sort made. With some 500 official side events, plus an estimated 3000 unofficial ones, a general sentiment among participants was that the real value and substance of the event was not in the negotiating room, but outside of it. Some of the world's leading thinkers within the global sustainable development constituency attended side events but had no intention of engaging with the inter-governmental process (IISDRS 2012).

So was Rio+20 the stage for yet another symbolic theatrical performance or were substantive decisions taken there that could potentially help define the future sustainable development agenda?

Processes and outcomes

In December 2009, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) called for a major summit in 2012 that would commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 Earth Summit. The objectives would be to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assess progress to date, identify remaining gaps in the implementation of current commitments and address new and emerging challenges. In particular, Rio+20 focused primarily on the themes of a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD).

Preparations took place under a tight deadline, with three preparatory (PrepCom), three inter-sessional and three informal consultation meetings being held up until the very last week of the conference. Regional preparatory meetings were also convened during the second half of 2011 by each of the UN's five Regional Economic Commissions (Chasek 2012), but due to the timing they were unable to feed into the deliberations of the first two PrepComs. Unlike in the 2002 WSSD, sub-regional fora were rather sporadic, as no systematic plans had been developed in advance to facilitate them. Overall, the Rio+20 process was characterised by protracted negotiations on the text, which remained riddled with brackets till the closing plenary of the final PrepCom. The constant expansion and contraction of the text was a feature of the preparatory negotiations. From 19 pages in January 2012, the 'Zero Draft' had ballooned to more than 200 pages by March, only to shrink to 80 pages a couple of weeks before the actual summit (IISDRS 2012). The final outcome of the conference, titled 'The Future We Want', contains 283 paragraphs and is 53 pages long.

This outcome document is weak on commitments or agreed actions. The theme of a 'green economy' proved particularly divisive throughout the negotiations. The G-77/China was highly suspicious of the concept, with some members

of the group objecting to any language that could potentially place limits on their development pathways. As Bolivia summarised: ‘no single development model – whatever its colour – should be imposed, and that the rights of developing states to pursue their own development paths must be upheld’ (IISDRS 2012, p. 21). Apart from noting that the concept of green economy lacked definitional clarity and could therefore lead to trade barriers and ‘green protectionism’, reservations also centred on concerns that its focus on the intersection between environment and economy could under-emphasise the social pillar of sustainable development. Despite receiving substantial support from *inter alia* the European Union (EU), the G-77/China remained unified in its opposition to establishing concrete targets and a roadmap for the green economy. The outcome document exhibits highly qualified text on this topic, referring to the green economy as one of many tools available to countries for approaching sustainable development. Reflective of the lowest common denominator position of the G-77/China, the outcome on the green economy dramatically demonstrated the distance between the state of knowledge and practice in the world at large and the quality of discussion in multilateral environmental negotiations.

On the IFSD, there was wide acknowledgement of the need for more effective institutional arrangements at the local, national, regional and international levels. With more than 500 Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in place and about 40 international organisations dealing with various aspects of environmental governance, the overall landscape was recognised as being too fragmented and weak to ensure proper implementation and monitoring of agreed commitments. In broad terms, institutional reform proposals focused on the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD).

The EU and the African Group called for UNEP to be transformed into a UN Environment Organisation (UNEO) – with the status of a specialised agency – so as to ensure greater coherence between the three pillars of sustainable development and improve coordination with other UN agencies and International Financial Institutions (IFIs). EU enthusiasm was not shared by *inter alia* the United States, Canada or Japan, with the United States arguing that UNEP’s mandate was already generous (IISDRS 2012). The final decision ‘strengthens and upgrades’ UNEP primarily through establishing universal membership in its Governing Council.

Created to review Agenda 21 implementation, but unable to agree on a negotiated outcome during its 2007 and 2011 sessions, the CSD was another key IFSD issue during Rio+20 deliberations. With its credibility in question and donor support withering, the decision was made to launch a process aimed at replacing it by 2014 with a high-level forum which would report to the UNGA through the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The final decision contains a long list of functions envisaged for this forum, the chief one being the provision of political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development (see UN 2012).

Beyond the two major themes, a range of other important issues were discussed in Rio. On Means of Implementation, the G-77/China called repeatedly for new and additional financial resources from developed countries and a mechanism to facilitate technology transfer. However, these proposals were taken off the table due to opposition from key industrialised countries such as the United States, Canada and Japan. The final text merely includes agreement to start processes to propose options on an effective sustainable development financing strategy and to identify options for a facilitation mechanism that promotes technology transfer.

Other processes that will be put in place include, *inter alia*: adopting the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on sustainable consumption and production; developing models for best practice on sustainability reporting; starting a programme to work on broader measures to complement GDP; and taking a decision in two years on the development of an international instrument under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regarding marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The outcome document also included text on trade-distorting subsidies, fisheries and fossil fuel subsidies, and a registry of voluntary commitments to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication.

Perhaps the lasting legacy of Rio+20 will be the widely supported proposal by Colombia and Guatemala at the Latin American regional preparatory meeting to define Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, concerns were raised by the G-77/China about the convergence and compatibility between the SDGs and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Thus, the outcome document adopted a process to develop universal SDGs, but not a more detailed outline of themes and timelines as proposed by the EU. Nevertheless, the SDGs are likely to be among the most important political decisions of Rio+20 as they will help define the post-2015 development agenda.

Symbolism versus substance

In post-conference commentaries, many observers, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and civil society leaders were quick to brand Rio+20 an unmitigated failure given the dearth of firm mandates, goals, targets and timelines. Those close to the process, however, highlighted that the low ambition of the outcome document was defined by the wider geopolitical and economic context, such as the global recession, crisis in the Eurozone, a US presidential election year, and an emerging multi-polar world.

In any case, Brazil, as hosts of the conference, had much at stake. With careful calibration of country positions and a desire to bring credibility back to multilateral environmental processes, which had been undermined *inter alia* by inability to achieve consensus at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, Brazil crafted a compilation text immediately prior to the start of Rio+20 that sought a compromise rather than an ideal set of outcomes (IISDRS 2012).

Through negotiating groups and informal consultations, the Brazilian hosts aimed for a fair distribution of discomfort in the text, which led to the outcome document being agreed in principle by delegations the day before Rio+20 opened. Brazil was widely complimented for this confident negotiating style and, during the closing plenary, for its leadership.

It remains to be seen, however, how much this mega-conference further institutionalised the norms of environmental responsibility. The outcome document highlights a growing disconnect between civil society, the science community and government delegates. On the one hand, governments, notably the Brazilian hosts, wanted to preserve the integrity of multilateralism, by accepting a lowest common denominator text. On the other hand, governments identified – rhetorically at least – the need to produce solutions that effectively integrate the latest scientific evidence to address sustainable development challenges. Although the outcome document highlights the need to strengthen the science–policy interface, recognition of the science-based concept of ‘planetary boundaries’ was removed from the text. However, the outcome document does acknowledge that governments alone cannot deliver sustainable development, and thus calls on all stakeholders to make voluntary commitments and partnerships to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication. As the conference closed, of 692 voluntary commitments, governments were involved in only 50 (7%) (IISDRS 2012). Questions remain regarding the extent to which this bottom-up approach will be accountable and substantively compensate for the dearth of innovation emanating from the intergovernmental process itself.

In sum, Rio+20 provided an opportunity to take the measure of the international community’s capacity to deal with intractable issues. The disappointing outcomes, in parallel with the climate negotiations, signal that there is an urgent need for new forums beyond the corridors of UN summitry, notably for civil society alongside the regional groups and possibly the G-20. The conference organisers were quick to point out the myriad side events showcasing new and innovative ideas and initiatives where it was apparent that sustainable development remains a vital discourse and organising principle, but one that can no longer rely on the intergovernmental process to inject innovation and leadership. The challenge remains to get multiple stakeholders such as NGOs, community organisations, local authorities, and the private sector to work together in innovative partnerships for the implementation of sustainable development at subnational levels. In addition, the regional architecture could better integrate sustainable development policies from international to national levels (Chasek 2012); although the G-20 cannot implement the outcomes of Rio+20, it can certainly exert pressure to push the process along. The role of broker countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, will be crucial in finding common ground between the G-77/China, EU, and US, Canada and Japan among others.

In a final statement to Rio+20, the Children and Youth caucus presented a judgement on the deliberations that failed to inspire them: ‘We came here to celebrate our generation. We have danced, dreamed and loved on the streets of

Rio and found something to believe in. You have chosen not to celebrate with us' (IISDRS 2012, p. 23). Assessments of the multilateral process are useful only insofar as they serve to inform the legitimate aspiration to hold governments to account but also to identify those emerging opportunities to translate even their limited ambitions into the 'future we want'. Twenty years ago, the spectacle of the first major 'Earth Summit' acted as a register of the state of the world – an optimistic post-Cold War moment when expectations about a 'peace dividend' and the 'global village' seemed to open the door to the mainstreaming of global environmental priorities. The first 'Earth Summit' certainly shifted language and led to attempts to integrate environmental concerns into economic and social policy. The Rio+20 summit demonstrated that much of the progress remains little more than spectacle while the central debate about shifting the terms of economic policy – even in the midst of a system-wide crisis – invites as much denial as leadership.

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