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Rio+20: a chronicle of the summit

Environment

Last June, two decades on from the successful Earth Summit, which laid down the bases for worldwide environmental policy, Brazil's capital hosted the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) with the aim of reaching a worldwide agreement to check the environmental degradation of our planet. Vested interests of the countries came out winning, however, and the conference closed with a half-hearted declaration putting off any major decisions for future meetings.



The President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, together with the UN Secretary General, Ban-Ki-moon, during the opening ceremony of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

By **CARLOS COROMINAS**. Environmental journalist.

Rio+20 kicked off with no great expectations of a major agreement binding countries to take measures to stem environmental degradation. The worldwide economic downturn, the situation in Europe and the dovish positions adopted by traditionally hawkish countries augured ill for the outcome of the conference on sustainable development. Nonetheless the venue and timing of the conference, 20 years on from the Earth Summit in Tierra in Río de Janeiro, did fuel some hopes that the spirit of that meeting, which laid down the bases for international environmental policy, might yet prevail.

On 20 June Río de Janeiro woke up to a rainy dawn. The signs of an exceptional event in the offing, building up over the last week, were now obvious: streets blocked off, a holiday for public institutions and traffic jams of official cars signalling the arrival of over one hundred heads of state and government that were going to take part in Rio+20 over the next three days. The final declaration had been signed a day earlier and the only thing lacking now was for the presidents to address the plenary session and pose together for the official photos. The absence of Cameron, Obama and Merkel reflected the lowly status of this summit on the international political agenda. The impeachment and removal from office of Paraguay's President Lugo also coincided with the last day of the conference and prompted a quick agenda switch by several Latin American leaders to confront this newly-broken crisis in the neighbouring country.

The objective of this sustainable development conference was ambitious: to reach an agreement that would set up poverty reduction and welfare-boosting measures without harming the environment or draining resources. To that end the countries had proposed a recapitulation of developments 20 years on, improving the original proposals as need be.

In 1992 the Earth Summit held in the Brazilian capital approved the implementation of three conventions (Climate change biodiversity and the fight against desertification) designed to combat the main environmental problems from a global viewpoint and with the collaboration of all countries. This high-level summit also approved the creation of Agenda 21, an action plan for carrying out specific environmental policies. Although Rio+20 did not set out to cast doubt on these conventions and the Agenda 21, it did seek to assess progress so far and think up new ways of improving their performance on a global level.

The objective of Rio+20 was ambitious: reach an agreement

Already, back in 2010, the Tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Biological Diversity Convention, held in Nagoya (Japan), had reached an agreement to try to improve the coordination of these three conventions in view

on the creation of poverty-reducing and welfare-boosting mechanisms without harming the environment

of the fact that they dealt with many interrelated matters. For example, the disappearance of woodland reduces their CO₂-trapping capacity, thereby fuelling climate change; this in turn causes ecosystem changes that force resident species to migrate elsewhere or die off. In the words of Sergio Zelaya, Policy Advocacy and Global Issues coordinator of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, «one of the post-Río+20 challenges must be to improve

coordination between conventions and other measures».

Río+20 set out to be a watershed moment, promoting a global agreement to combat the environmental crisis and advocate sustainable development based on the UN-defined pillars: social development, economic development and environmental protection. Inter-negotiation corridor chat betrayed a sense of urgency: the certainty that time for reaching agreements on the planet's future was running out. According to the architect and UN Global 500 laureate Herbert Girardet, «it's too late now to speak of sustainable development; we need to begin to speak of regenerative development». The failure of previous summits, such as the Copenhagen climate-change summit and the all-pervasive economic crisis suggested beforehand that the Río would be another summit resulting in only a half-hearted agreement or no agreement at all.

The Negotiations

On the day before the official start of the summit the parties signed an agreement that curtailed the size and ambition of the original text, cutting it down from over 200 pages to 59. This was partly explained by Brazil's keenness to reach an agreement at any cost to head off the risk of Río+20 ending up empty-handed and undermining the diplomatic image of an emerging country. «All the delegations are frustrated, showing that there has been no consent», explained Luiz Alberto Figueiredo, head of Brazil's delegation and de facto spokesperson of Río+20. Figueiredo admitted that the declaration could have been better, but «rather a criticisable text than no text at all.

Nikhil Chandravarkar, UN spokesman in the negotiation, summed up the UN's posture in a nutshell: «It's a very well-balanced text, since no better agreement was on the cards». For Constanza Martínez, senior policy officer of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the document could not have been better given «the difference in interests between the United States, Europe and the G-77».

The approval of this text is the culmination of talks that began in January 2012 and built up to a draft of the main proposals. This was then fleshed out in the following months until producing the final text containing the agreements of the Río+20 summit under the title *The future we want*.

Agreements of Río+20

The summit revolved around two key concepts: green economy and sustainable development. In the first case a definition and implementation mechanism were sought; in the latter, strengthening of the UN institutions that watch out for the environment.

The green economy had become the summit buzzword and was repeated ad nauseam in all lectures and expert panels. As reflected in the final document, «the green economy should contribute to eradicating poverty as well as sustained economic growth, enhancing social inclusion, improving human welfare and creating opportunities for employment and decent work for all, while maintaining the healthy functioning of the Earth's ecosystems».

During previous negotiations the section dealing with the green economy included the creation of a UN mechanism to coordinate actions and help countries raise finance and obtain technology in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. The resulting paragraph recognises the importance of implementing technology-enhancing and financing-expediting policies but advocates that it should be the UN itself, together with important donors and international organisations, that take on responsibility for coordination and providing information for anyone who requests it. Lacking any specific mechanism in its own right, therefore, the development of the green economy will not have any checkable goal or results and will focus on the promotion of one-off UN-brokered actions.

In the press conference following approval of the final agreement, Figueiredo admitted that there was no consent on the meaning of the green economy and that this had been the main stumbling block in talks up to that point.

The US envoy in the negotiations, Jonathan Pershing, confirmed this declaration, citing a moment when two persons were defending the green economy in a discussion but with different words and without reaching an agreement. «For the United

States the green economy means how to continue development and growth», he explained, adding that «it is impossible to live comfortably in a society that has no water or only polluted air». The US stance on this and other matters was firmly rooted in the defence of national sovereignty. «We do not accept that any outside body should regulate what the United States does in terms of environmental matters internally», stressed the envoy.

The other summit hot potato was the improvement of UN sustainable-development institutions, to enhance their efficiency and adapt them more appositely to local situations. One of the proposals put forward was to set up a World Environment Organisation along the lines of organisations like the World Health Organisation or the World Trade Organisation. This would be based on the United Nations Education Programme (UNEP), enlarging its remit. This status would allow the resulting agency to raise its own funds and exert more pressure on governments.

The summit did not even reach a consensus on the meaning of the term «green economy», which was not developed towards any checkable results or objectives

Finally, it was decided to «strengthen and improve» UNEP to endow it with universal representation and better financing arrangements from the UN and voluntary contributions. These measures will have to be approved at the 67th UN General Assembly.

In the opinion of one of the Río+20 negotiators, André Correa, «the best way of protecting the environment is integrating it across-the-board into the economy and society rather than isolating it as a single agency». According to Nikhi Chandravarkar, «strengthening of the UNEP would improve decision taking and improve and unify financing procedures».

It is precisely financing that turned out to be another stumbling block in this summit. In the current economic juncture financing references were reduced to waffly statements without any assumption of specific resource-raising commitments. Most of the paragraphs including any mention of financing were cut out or trimmed down to a general reference.

The final text opens the door to private financing for various programmes, as indicated in the following paragraph: «the interplay of development assistance with private investment, trade and new development actors provides new opportunities for aid to leverage private resource flows». This came in for criticism from some countries and NGOs present at the forum. Quamrul Chowdhury, from the Bangladesh delegation, pointed out that the G-77 wants «financing to be public in character to ensure an effective financial and technology transfer for developing countries».

The director of Greenpeace, Daniel Mittler, fiercely criticised governments: «they claim they can't put money on the table because of the economic and financial crisis and yet they talk about sustainable development while continuing to subsidise fossil fuels». Mittler referred to the controversial paragraph in the energy section advocating «the phasing out of harmful and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption and undermine sustainable development».

Controversial Agreements

At the start of the week it seemed that Río+20 could become the «ocean summit». A proposal to protect biodiversity and genetic resources on the high seas mustered advocates and, if finally approved, could have been considered one of the major meeting agreements. A new protection system was mooted, involving the creation of marine reserves in international waters to protect biodiversity and genetic resources (used in scientific research and in the development of new drugs protected on land by the Nagoya protocol).

The Monday afternoon Ocean session closed without reaching an agreement. Talks resumed at 23:00 hours with the intention of discussing paragraph 163 in relation to the creation of these marine reserves. The United States, Canada and Venezuela led the opposition with more moderate support from Japan, Russia, Norway and Iceland. The main proponents of the idea were the European Union and G-77. The text could have remained open for discussion during high level sessions to be attended by heads of state. The Brazil delegation stepped in, however, and rushed through an agreement before the arrival of heads of state at the summit.

The meeting was carried out in the form of closed groups where three or four countries discussed specific details, an unusual format in UN negotiations of this type, where matters are discussed by everyone in an open session. The seven countries opposed to the approval of marine reserves confronted the 180 that defended this measure. At a particular moment of the negotiation the head of the Venezuelan delegation, Claudia Salerno, asked for the meeting to be held behind closed doors. Finally, by now in the small hours, the text was approved and paragraph 163 (162 in the final text) appeared without any reference to the creation of marine reserves in the high seas, which was put off for later decision by the UN General Assembly.

According to Milko Schwartzman of Greenpeace, Venezuela justified its position on the grounds that it had not signed the so called *Law of the Sea*, «although many other countries that have not ratified this law still supported the proposal» Moreover, «the United State's position is due to possible pharmaceutical research interests and high-seas oil wells» according to the same delegate, for whom «this agreement could have become the single positive point of Río+20 in terms of taking measures to pressurise governments and companies to protect the oceans».

A member of the Venezuela delegation professed complete non-understanding of the measure and an inability to explain it having received only a simple order not to support a paragraph containing any reference to high-seas marine reserves.

Río+20 wound up with a half-hearted declaration that put off any major decisions for future meetings or decisions of the General Assembly

Another controversial point of the negotiations was replacement of the term «reproductive rights» by «reproductive health». The organisation UN Women, led by the ex-presidents of Chile and Norway, Michele Bachelet and Gro Harlem Brundtland, respectively, brought pressure to bear from the start of the week for the text to include a reference to the importance of women in decision taking. Bachelet placed women in the very centre of any sustainable development process and Brundtland stressed «the decisive role of women in controlling family

size and, ipso facto, the size of the population».

No one is happy

The summit ended on 22 June with a feeling of general disappointment. Many governments did not hide their dissatisfaction with the text. The social organisations criticised the fact that the summit served private interests. Even UN representative found it hard to understand a fists-aloft reaction. Some national leaders criticised the agreement as under ambitious. Witness François Hollande, the French president, who lamented the lack of any agreement about the creation of a World Environment Organisation or financing arrangements.

The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, declared that «our efforts have not lived up to the measure of the challenge» Members of the Ecuador delegation even explained that the failure of the text was more than made up for by the chance given to their president, Rafael Correa, to criticise the policies of the West from such an important tribune as the plenary session of Río+20. The fact that the three days of the official summit served only for various world leaders to traipse one after the other across the plenum tribune proclaiming green policies betrayed the fact that, all too often, Río+20 was seen as a chance of chalking up political kudos rather than making any serious attempt to defend the environment.

Río+20 ended with a half-baked declaration putting off any important decisions for future meetings or decisions of the General Assembly. The text does not pick up on the agreements of 1992 or reflect the sense of urgency being voiced by scientists and environmentalists. The time for action was now; the next meeting may well be too late.

The Other Summit

Alongside the official summit a People's Summit was also being held in the park called *Aterro do Flamengo*, a seven-day action-packed meeting bringing together social movements from around the world, indigenous peoples, artists and awareness raisers. Every corner of the park was turned into a showcase of initiatives by organisations, companies and individuals.

On this occasion the park was filled with marquees and stalls of social organisations, mingling with major stands run by companies and pathside shops selling all types of social merchandising. Within a short walking distance visitors could obtain information on the Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimiento de los Sin Tierra*) buy a recycled bag in the Mail Service stall or find out about the actions being carried out by *Banco do Brasil* in remote areas of the Brazilian Amazon.



Street demonstration in a Brazilian city while the summit was on

Despite the green marketing endeavours of some firms, the park *Aterro do Flamengo* filled up with proposals from the social movements, who occupied marquees and ran stands to debate such matters as social justice, food sovereignty, energy and employment. Activity during the week-long People's Summit was frenetic, rounded out by several street demonstrations throughout Brazil and street theatre pleading for protection of the Amazon from the livestock industry; there were even calls for 2014 World Cup money to be spent instead on environmental protection.

José Carlos Luiz Santos Olivera, cocoa and palm-tree farmer of Bahía and member of the international peasants' movement *Via Campesina*, complained that «the official negotiations benefit major firms rather than small farmers like us». Santos Olivera had travelled to Rio de Janeiro with another two farmers to learn about other farming cooperative initiatives and apply them to their own case.



The People's Summit put on exhibitions and other artistic activities by diverse groups.

The Director General of WWF, Lasse Gustavsson, was harshly critical of the results of the official summit: «After two years of sophisticated UN diplomacy the outcome is more lip-service politics, more conflicts and more destruction of the environment». Gustavsson therefore considers that the only headway made in the last ten years has come from the civil society rather than governments.

Similar feelings were expressed by *Tom Kuchard*, from *Ecologistas en Acción*, one of the Spanish organisations present at Río+20: «Where the real solutions and true analyses are to be found is in the People's Summit, which has called for a change in the consumption model to save the planet».

The People's Summit was also frequented by eccentric characters advocating a change in the economic model or the defense of the planet from their own particular viewpoints. Hard by the Greenpeace marquee stood the bamboo woman, a willowy model who is travelling around the schools of Brazil to bring home to children the message of sustainability and defence of the Amazon.

Sustainable Development Goals

One of the summit's most successful proposals was put forward by Colombia and Guatemala to create Sustainable Development Goals, defining some specific goals that would work in a similar way to the Millennium Development Goals. In fact, Colombia and Guatemala took their inspiration from these goals to build up their proposal and define the Sustainable Development Goals. «We further recognize the importance and utility of a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) based on the Millennium Development Goals, to produce a series of indicators that reflect the specific conditions and priorities of each country», as the proposal runs.

Although the Millennium Goals and Sustainable Development Goals are complementary in the proposal put forward by Colombia and Guatemala, the latter are universally applicable whereas the former focus on developing countries. The ultimate aim of the proposal is to set up a mechanism for practical implementation of the sustainable-development proposals coming out of Río+20. According to the proposal of Colombia and Guatemala, established indicators would enable us to gauge the impact of the specifically proposed measures.



Mariano Rajoy, president of the Spanish government during his intervention at the summit plenum

In the end the Sustainable Development Goals were included in terms similar to those put forward by Colombia and Guatemala, and it was agreed to set up a working group made up by 30 members from different countries before the 67th UN Assembly. This group will now define objectives and present reports to the general assembly to build and develop these goals beyond the 2015 deadline of the Millennium Goals.

Many organisations and delegations declared themselves in agreement with establishing these goals beyond 2015 to avoid distracting attention from the Millennium Goals. The president of the Spanish government, Mariano Rajoy, expressed himself in these terms when he addressed the plenary session, stressing that «this is not the time to create new objectives that might distract us from our efforts just when the goal is looming up on the horizon».

A city taken over by Río+20

Río de Janeiro became for one week the cynosure of worldwide diplomacy. Looking ahead to the 2014 World Cup and above all, the 2016 Olympic Games, the city authorities were keen to demonstrate their capacity of hosting large-scale events. The great Brazilian city became a vast stage with proposals relating to summit objectives being made in nearly every district. “Sustainability” was the common denominator on adverts, posters, street exhibits or shop publicity: for one week everything seemed to be sustainable in Río de Janeiro. The figures constructed on the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema turned into small mock-ups welcoming Río+20 participants in various languages with sustainable-development watchwords. Citizens complained readily about how much hotel and restaurant prices had soared during the summit week. There was also a heavy police presence in tourist zones and a three-day holiday was declared for public institutions during the three official summit days to facilitate security arrangements. Joao, a taxi driver, angrily pointed out how much the city had changed in recent years: «They’ve torn the guts out of Río; everything is now for tourists and foreigners». According to Joao, «there is an unwritten pact» between the police and delinquents: the latter don’t come out the *favela* (slums) and the police won’t bother them. «The true Río no longer exists; they’ve killed its essence, its real flavour and music. Beforehand it was more dangerous but much more authentic and warmer», he snapped.

As well as the official summit and the People’s Summit, there were other meetings throughout the whole week in which various sectors expressed their particular take on matters like the green economy, sustainable development and the encouragement of green jobs. Forums of employers, youngsters, scientists and legal eagles were held. One of the most eye-catching events outside the two summits was the *Humanidade*, held in a huge fort overlooking Copacabana beach. This

hosted various discussion panels with the participation of scientists, entrepreneurs and experts on matters like energy or food sovereignty.



Many organisations jumped on the Río+20 bandwagon to present some of their initiatives. Ríocentro filled its rooms with parallel events; pavilions in the park called *Parque dos Atletas*, lying opposite the complex, showed various countries town-planning, energy and efficiency initiatives.

Some initiatives showed how technology and internet are giving us a better idea of the planet or furnishing citizens with information. Witness the collaboration between the European Space Agency and the three Rio Conventions, facilitating the use of satellite data for measuring desertification, changes in biodiversity and the effects of climate change. Another project presented under the wing of Río+20 is Infoamazonía, which gives periodical information on deforestation in the Amazon or the industries operating there, with up-to-date information on the state of the rainforest.

Even Río's *favelas* became a presentation scenario. *Banco do Brasil* publicised a water storage project for areas of problematic public health. The idea is simple: build huge cement tanks for taking water from a canal network to the whole *favela*. The project encourages collective management of the community tank.