

United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) – Rio+20: What an effort for such a meager result

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Looking back

20 years after the “UN Conference on Environment and Development” in Rio de Janeiro and 10 years after the “World Summit on Sustainable Development” in Johannesburg, the world community met again to look at the achievements of the far reaching action programmes from the previous conferences. At this year’s “World Summit on Sustainable Development” in Rio (Rio+20) a number of new topics were on the agenda for consultations: The so called “Green Economy” and the development of “Sustainable Development Goals” as political goals. In the institutional arena the upgrading of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to a United Nations Environment Organisation and a change in the UN-Sustainability Architecture.

Originally the Rio+20 summit was not in the long term conference programme of the United Nations. It was the initiative of Brazil with a speech from its the President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva before the UN General Assembly in 2007, which lead one year later, on the basis of an application by the G-77 States, to the decision to hold the UNCSD in Rio in 2012. In contrast to the 2 previous

conferences, the expectations for sound and far reaching results were very low. The discussions about sustainability worldwide are too much shaped by the deep and contrasting differences, which have been the reasons for the spectacular break-up of the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009 and a deadlock in any further negotiations in the frame of the UN climate convention. For different reasons industrialized countries like Japan, Canada, Russia and the USA, the ALBA-countries like Venezuela and Bolivia or the emergent nations like India have for some part great reservations against significant improvements regarding the contents and the institutions, with which the Rio-agenda could be moved forward. The low expectations and the “Copenhagen-Effect” lead to the result, that important Heads of States did not attend the Rio summit, like among others Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Wladimir Putin and David Cameron.

Low expectations

Measured on the low expectations, the Rio summit in general produced those results which one could realistically expect. Looking at the meager realisation of “Agenda 21” (1992) and the

Johannesburg “Action Plan” (2002) from the beginning on this summit could only be a disappointment. After all, “Agenda 21” starts with the sentences: “Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being” and lists on 300 pages, what all needs to be done, to make the so far non-sustainable economic model truly sustainable. 10 years later in Johannesburg the world community again stated, that “human kind is at a crossroad” and the obligations of “Agenda 21” were reinforced in the “political declaration” and the “plan of implementation” (A/CO NF 199/20) under headlines like “Our commitment to sustainable development”, “Making it happen” and “Multilateralism is the future”.

“Green economy” remains undefined

How far the Member States of the United Nations (UN) have departed from the “spirit of Rio 1992” today, is demonstrated in the discussion about the “green economy”, a catch word that is as vague as “sustainable development”. In the “Zero Draft” of the final document from Jan. 10th 2012 it was formulated: “We are convinced that the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication should contribute to meeting key goals...” (§25 in the UN document). In the agreed final document one can hardly recognise the original intention, what “green economy” actually means. In the deeply sceptical text one finds a great number of conditions which a “green economy” must fulfil. Among others it should not negatively effect global trade; it has to be in line with the law of nations and it must increase the wealth of indigenous people. Which concrete actions will follow on the basis of such a text anyway is “written in

the stars”. Suggested is: “We encourage all states to develop their own green economy strategies through a transparent process of multi-stakeholder consultations” (§39 in the UN document).

Upgrading UNEP

The upgrade of UNEP to a full UN-special organization as demanded by the EU and great parts of civil society could not be realized in Rio, because besides the USA also Russia, Canada, Japan and important groups of the G-77 were not supporting this proposal. In the final session on Monday, June 18th, the American representative made clear, where the red line for his country was: neither the upgrade to a full UN-special organization, nor the change of the name of UNEP was acceptable. Nevertheless, in the new UNEP-governing board all member states will be represented and not only the 53 states so far. In addition, UNEP will be receiving a secured basic finance as part of the official UN-budget, in contrast to the very insecure finances entirely through donations of those 53 countries in the present UN-governing board. Additional donations to UNEP by member states will also be possible in the future.

This is a very important step on the road to a full UN-special organization, for which the very first proposal was already made at the Rio+5 special General Assembly in 1997 by the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl together with the Heads of States from Brasilia, South Africa and Singapore. It took long and difficult discussions and negotiation processes over the International Environmental Governance and especially Germany and France promoted for a UN-environment organization since many years. For long it was just a European idea, however since the African states made this into a prestige question for their continent (why should the only UN-institution in Africa have a lower status?), the chances to substantiate the idea have increased. But more could not be achieved realistically at

present, even if in most UN member states well established Ministries of Environment exist. However, the increase in prestige for UNEP with the decision at the Rio+20 summit should not be rated low: in future resolutions of the UNEP-governing board will be carried by all member states and with a finance based on obligatory fees it will be possible for UNEP to develop a greater independence from big donors.

No Sustainable Development Council

The activity to substantially alter the institutionally established “sustainability architecture” in the UN headquarters also brought about only a second grade result. The 1992 established “Commission for Sustainable Development” (CSD), which was intended as a body to actively accompany and support the so called Rio-follow-up-process, has not at all fulfilled the expectations. It has not produced any decisions in recent years, or if so they existed of recycled “agreed language”. Hardly any Minister attended any of the CSD meetings and it was, therefore only consequent to terminate this Commission. The original idea was to replace the CSD by a Sustainable Development Council (SDC) in line with the example of the UN-Human Rights Council. However, this was too far reaching for many member states. Mexico put forward the proposal for a “High Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development” within the frame of the existing “Economic and Social Council” of the UN. This idea was supported by the G-77 and was accepted at the end.

All 193 member states will belong to this new Forum, which puts more weight on it (but will not necessarily enhance its workability and effectiveness). The final Rio-document states that the new Forum “should avoid an overlap with existing structures, bodies and entities”. This makes clear, that the Forum will have no

mandate to seriously pursue the cross-section duty sustainable development. In addition, it seems very likely that in the new Forum all the same diplomats will be involved, who were already unsuccessful with the CDS and this means, one can have no really high expectations for substantial results from this Forum. The format and the organizational structure should be decided at the next UN-General Assembly in the fall of 2012. The first Forum should be called at the beginning of the 68th General Assembly of the UN in September 2013.

Sustainable Development Goals as an addition to Millennium Development Goals

The proposal from Columbia and Guatemala to agree on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to complement the 2015 ending Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was principally not questioned. However, to fill these with definitions of any content, which was tried for by the EU, was bound to fail. Now, the SDGs will be negotiated over the coming years, but in contrast to the MDGs they should then be valid for all member states and not only for developing countries.

This was heavily opposed by the USA. How they will stand to the “Post-2015-MDGs” and how the two negotiation processes will be coordinated is yet unclear. The final “Rio Document” has decided only, that both processes should proceed “coordinated and coherently”. A commission of 30 persons should work out proposal until the end of 2013.

Brazil puts the Europeans under pressure

In essence: these were the results from Rio+20. Agreed: this would not require having 12.000 Government delegates flying around the world. All that could have been achieved in a meeting (one day

long) in the General Assembly of the UN in New York! However, the main purpose of the summit - at least for the host - was not to achieve concrete results, but to increase the prestige by hosting such a conference. Brazil took over the lead in the negotiation process with the goal, that the negotiations for the final document would be finalized before the Heads of States would arrive. The Europeans withstood this absolutely unusual request for a long time, but were finally soft-boiled with the ruthless blackmail policy of the Brazilian Foreign Minister who declared, that everybody who would oppose this process would break up the summit, because there would be no further negotiations in the Heads of States section. In this moment Europe was in a weak position, because only very few Heads of States had declared their participation in the summit. It was obvious that for Brazil the only important point was the unity of the G-77 and China. A split like it happened at the last climate conference in Durban 2011 needed to be avoided.

It was obvious that Brazil had no real self interest and no specific subject matters to work for in this conference and this gave an advantage to those countries, which

did not want any substantial changes of the status quo. The EU found itself quickly in the awkward situation to demand changes without offering much itself. For the demand to set some substantial points for the negotiations of the SDGs the EU found no supporters; for the demand of an UNEP-upgrade at least the African States.

For different reasons the situation in Rio for negotiations was such, that the advocates of the status quo were always in a stronger position. If a "nice summit show" is not allowed be "disturbed by serious negotiations" and the unity of various groups of States is more important, than real results, then the contents are lost, and the question of the sense of such Mega-Conferences is even more pronounced as before such an event. The question what Rio+20 has really brought about will only be answered in a few years when the new UNEP possibly will show some measurable results and the new "High-Level-Political-Forum" has taken up its work and the SDGs will be finally negotiated.

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