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The Road to Rio+20: Ambitious Goals for Sustainable Development?

By Ong Suan Ee

Synopsis

The world's biggest summit on environment and development in 20 years will take place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June this year. What are the opportunities and challenges for this global multilateral effort towards cultivating a green economy?

Commentary

INTERNATIONAL LEADERS will congregate in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 20-22 June for the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCED). The conference will mark the 20th anniversary of UNCED that was first hosted by Rio de Janeiro in 1992 when 190 heads of state agreed to several legally-binding environment agreements.

Rio+20, however, is taking a different approach. Its recently-released zero draft outcome document, entitled "The Future We Want", requested that governments set their own targets and work voluntarily towards a global green economy, poverty eradication and sustainable development. While laudable, such a proposal, however, is not without challenges.

Scratching the Surface of Rio+20's Potential

The Rio+20 zero draft deserves commendation for various reasons. Firstly, it openly recognises that most countries have largely failed to meet the challenges and obligations as outlined at the 1992 UNCED. It also reiterates the "multiple inter-related crises" that we currently face, their adverse impacts on development gains over the past two decades, and the various systemic gaps in implementation of prior commitments. Accordingly it seeks commitments to measurable deliverables and goals, outlined in a comprehensive roadmap spanning 28 years - 2012 to 2030.

As noted in The Guardian: "Global summits don't deliver success, but they are a prerequisite for making success possible." The optimism surrounding Rio+20's potential is supported by precedents which indicate that concerted international government action in a rules-based system can and does work. The most notable example is the Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer. Ratified by 196 states, the Protocol has resulted in significant decreases in the volume of ozone-depleting chemicals in the atmosphere and early signs of stratospheric ozone recovery. Some commentators see potential for similar success to emerge from Rio+20.

Rio+20 also rides on the wave of a series of UN-led sustainable development efforts. The most recent is UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's 'Sustainable Energy for All' initiative, which urges holistic advancement of sustainable development goals by governments, the private sector and other stakeholders through commitments to economic growth, poverty alleviation and environmental protection. Ban's effort, in the wake of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is helping gather the much-needed political momentum to propel the Rio+20 agenda forward.

Also to be commended is the UN's long-term planning and perspective beyond Rio+20. The draft contends that Rio+20 is ultimately a cornerstone summit - a launch pad for further action and future commitment. Ultimately, Rio+20's goals are aimed at complementing and strengthening pre-existing action-oriented development goals like the MDGs, not replacing them. If its potential is fulfilled, Rio+20 will be an integral cog for the establishment of a comprehensive post-MDG sustainable development framework come 2015.

Challenges and Obstacles: Spanners in the Works?

While the sustainable development agenda for Rio+20 is an important one, progress could be impeded by a number of pressing and as yet unaddressed concerns.

The global financial crisis continues to hog the limelight as the eurozone crunch remains unresolved while unemployment rates continue to undermine economic growth in the United States and the European Union. Widespread political change is expected as over 50 countries hold major elections this year, among them the American, French and Russian presidential elections as well as the power transition in China.

Several crucial issues, however, could impede progress of Rio+20.

Firstly, a key point of the draft is its green economy framework: it seeks to augment levels of human well-being and social equity while reducing environmental risks and ecological insecurity, with the ultimate aim of achieving sustainable development. The framework hopes to address all manner of challenges from "poverty eradication and food security, to human resource development and sustained growth that generates employment". These goals are ambitious at best and utopian at worst.

Creditably, the draft recognises the need for structural adjustments, particularly by developing countries struggling to eradicate poverty and sustain growth. It also highlights the financial and capacity issues within the existing inter-governmental framework for addressing environmental challenges. In response, the draft calls for increased autonomy and financial support, as well as to elevate the status of the Nairobi-based UN Environment Programme (UNEP), to that of other specialised agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Moreover, it remains to be seen whether Rio+20 will inject greater pragmatism, purpose, and political will into the negotiation process. The public has rightly grown cynical over past negotiations floundering due to unfulfilled pledges, a lack of urgency, goal pushbacks and open-ended bureaucratic structures.

Nevertheless as states putting their names to resolutions, signing protocols and ratifying treaties have become a norm in international governance, the symbolic political value of such acts must not be undervalued. However, whether such acts produce tangible results is debatable and multilateral successes akin to the Montreal Protocol remain few and far between.

To some degree, the success of Rio+20 also hinges on the attendance of key global players and here, the waters are murky. US President Barack Obama is not expected to attend as he campaigns for his second term in office. UK Prime Minister David Cameron announced that he would not attend. There are unconfirmed reports of the attendance of Chinese premier Wen Jiabao.

It remains to be seen whether the ambitious agenda of Rio+20 will take off without the participation of some of the most important actors on the international stage and whether Rio+20 will turn all the keys necessary to promote change – namely political will, financial support, and follow-through action. In sum, it is prudent to look to Rio+20 with cautious optimism. While Rio+20 has the potential to become more than an elite talk-shop, global summits in and of themselves are not guarantors of success.

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