

CIERP Policy Brief

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What was New at Rio+20? *An Analysis of The Future We Want*

By **Rishikesh Ram Bhandary** | *March 2013*

Rio+20 was able to identify the multitude of gaps that must be filled if the international community is to address sustainable development seriously. With ambition reduced by the current political and economic environment, the responsibility will be with governments and stakeholders to use “The Future We Want” as a launch pad to truly achieving that future.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, was organized with the mandate to “secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development.”¹ The conference marked a much-needed milestone given the inability of all three Rio Conventions, particularly the climate convention, to respond to the crises facing the world in a meaningful way.

Rio+20 took stock of the uneven progress that has been made over the last 20 years, and the outcome document, known as The Future We Want, provides a fair indication of the enormity of the task at hand. The Great Recession and the ongoing Eurozone crisis did not just affect the ambition that the parties brought to the table but also further polarized north-south debates on already contentious issues like the Green Economy and other aspects of sustainable development. The most visible manifestation of this polarization was the South’s refusal to embrace the notion of the Green Economy unless it received concessions on Means of Implementation (finance, technology transfer, trade, and capacity building).

The outcome also bears a strong imprint of the faltering trade negotiations under the Doha Development Agenda, the post-2015 development agenda, and the repeated inability of the climate change negotiations to deliver concrete agreements. Taken together, in spite of a common understanding of the urgency of the problems that lay before us, Rio+20 was convened with low expectations from all quarters. The context described above is reflected strongly in the text.

Keen observers notice that much of the final text is familiar, which leads many to wonder if there is anything new in the document that had not already been included in prior international agreements. In fact, an analysis of the text indicates that more than 57% of the paragraphs contain reiterations of past agreements, with an additional 6% and 10% containing verbatim repeats and paraphrases respectively. Actions or language that could serve as mandates for further action were found in 37% of the text. What follows is a summary of the major highlights of the final outcome that are informed by the language tracing analysis² that was conducted.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The Green Economy was recognized as one of the two major themes of the conference. However, progress was limited for two major reasons: some countries saw the principle of equity being challenged due to the ‘common undertaking’ spirit of the theme, and the Group of 77 and China made traction on this theme contingent on Means of Implementation, particularly finance. The resulting text outcome is a vague definition of the Green Economy that emphasizes its country-driven nature with a focus on national and sub-national implementation without explicit links to Means of Implementation. This raises questions regarding how Green Economy programs and policies will be implemented, what the process of accountability is, and how ambition can be increased.

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1 Paragraph 20. United Nations General Assembly: A/RES/64/236

2 The methodology of this analysis and a link to the full text is included at the end of this briefing.

The second major theme of the conference, the **Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD)**, is most visibly marked by the effort to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development with its particular emphasis on the social pillar. In addition, the text also reflects the Parties' embrace of non-state actors as important agents for sustainable development. Yet, with the focus still on 'intergovernmental' processes, the emerging IFSD from Rio+20 does not capture the shifting dynamics of sustainable development programming and implementation. IFSD also fell short of expectations on a few major counts. First, the United Nations Environment Programme only saw the membership of its Governing Council expand to universal membership. It is still without a mandate to coordinate multilateral environmental agreements and continues to be reliant on UN core funding and voluntary contributions for its financing. Second, the High Level Political Forum, an upgraded replacement of the Commission for Sustainable Development, only has an indicative mandate with the General Assembly tasked to negotiate further modalities. Third, the creation of an ombudsperson for future generations was resisted. Instead, parties decided to ask the Secretary-General to prepare a report for the General Assembly's consideration.

In the **thematic areas**, there were some important developments. First, a 10-year framework of programs was adopted on Sustainable Consumption and Production. This included an exhortation to end fossil fuel subsidies in developed countries and a request to "consider rationalizing" subsidies for developing countries. Second is the promise of "equitable universal coverage" of health services. Third, Rio+20 also strengthens the resolve to conclude the negotiations on the protection of marine biodiversity beyond areas of national jurisdiction.

However, there were also some regressions. Most notably, specific references to "reproductive rights" were dropped from the final agreement text on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Veterans of the process, like Gro Harlem Brundtland, were quick to denounce the removal of such language as a "major step backwards,"³ as these issues had been resolved in the Beijing Declaration of 1995. After all, Principle 20 of the original Rio Declaration had already recognized the vital role women play in sustainable development.

On **Means of Implementation**, parties drew familiar battle lines on finance, trade, intellectual property rights, and finance. "This is not a pledging conference" was a common refrain, and the positional negotiations of this group played a major role in slowing progress in other groups. The finance section bears only existing commitments with text excerpted from the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development, the Monterrey Consensus, and the Accra Agenda for Action, among others. However, existing pledges for long-term climate change finance were not repeated, nor does the text bear any indication of how resources will be raised for climate change before 2020. The negotiations were not able to capture the tremendous transformation that is underway in the South, particularly the financial muscle of sovereign wealth funds.

While not a part of the original mandate, **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** quickly came to be seen as a key deliverable from Rio+20, but differences regarding both the substance and the process of developing these goals dampened the momentum. Skeptics argued that SDGs would distract the process underway for a post-2015 development agenda as the Millennium Development Goals are set to expire. Ultimately, those hesitant to let the Secretary-General convene experts to produce the goals won, and the parties agreed to initiate an intergovernmental process to formulate the goals.

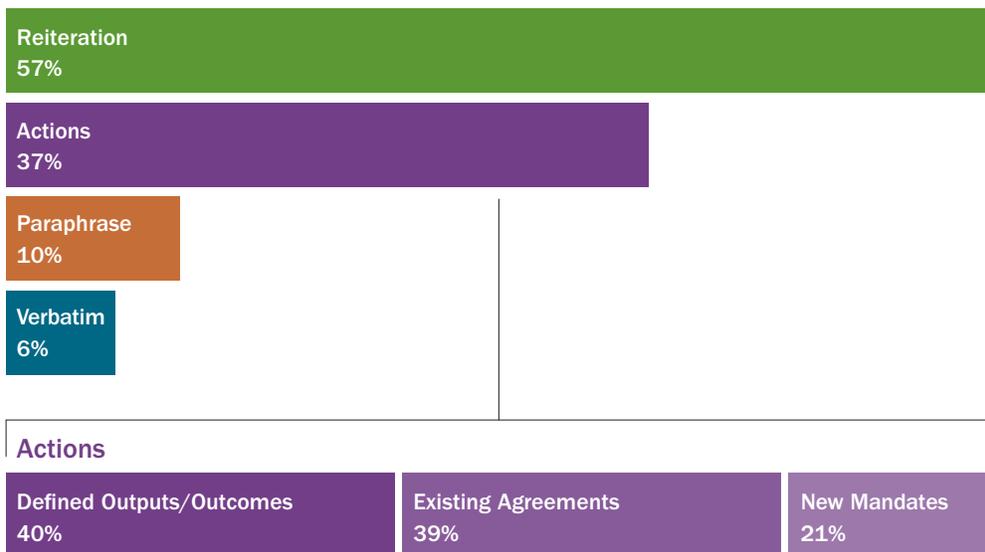
Regarding **process**, the text reflects the Brazilian presidency's discomfort with leaving issues hanging until the last moment and their desire to close negotiations before the summit level segment officially started. In addition, it is difficult to gauge the impact that the new and innovative Rio Dialogues, which took place in parallel with the official negotiations, had on the text.

3 "Rio didn't go far enough—what now" July 9, 2012. <http://www.theelders.org/dialogue/rio20-didnt-go-far-enough-what-now>

The complete outcome text highlighted according to the text analysis categories described to the right is available at: <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/CIERP/Publications/TheFutureWeWant>.

THE FUTURE WE WANT

Text Analysis Category Breakdown



Please note: Figures denote the percentage of paragraphs in the text containing any language representing the stated category. Some paragraphs contained text representing more than one category, hence the sum of percentages is greater than 100%.

METHODOLOGY USED FOR ANALYSIS OF THE FUTURE WE WANT TEXT

Reaffirm/Reassert: Languages in green have the broadest definition. Footnoted highlights indicate reaffirmations, recommitments, or recognitions of agreed efforts to address sustainable development. Highlights without footnotes are notional commitments to work on different aspects of sustainable development without the precision demanded by the Actions category below.

Actions: Highlighted in purple, these languages are actions that contain one or both of these elements: mandates (organization/legal forum/time) and defined scope. These could be concrete decisions (establishing High Level Political Forum) or commitments (“redoubling efforts to achieve universal access to HIV prevention”).

Paraphrase: Languages that have been paraphrased are highlighted in orange. These paraphrases do not pass the verbatim test but can be traced to specific documents.

Verbatim: Highlights in blue are languages that can be traced *verbatim* to existing documents. A few examples of these documents are the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, MDGs High Level Plenary Outcome Document, and the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development. The interpretation of verbatim is strict and the sources are mentioned in the footnotes. In most cases, only one such existing source is identified. It is likely that the same language exists in other agreed documents as well.

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