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RIO+20: Earth Summit Negotiated the Size of the Zero

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, Jun 7 2012 (IPS) - Amidst much political fanfare, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro concluded with the adoption of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the landmark Agenda 21 blueprint for a sustainable future in the 21st century.

Still, there was widespread disappointment over the final outcome of that conference – primarily because there were no firm funding commitments by the world's rich nations.

Asked about the frustrations on financing, a former secretary-general of the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Dr. Gamani Corea made perhaps the most realistic assessment at that time when he famously declared: "We negotiated the size of the zero."

But will history repeat itself?

The funding demands at the Earth Summit were expected to be met primarily in three ways: by creating the Global Environmental Facility (GEF); increased official development assistance (ODA), specifically earmarked for sustainable development; and commitments by the various international financial and development institutions.

But over the last 20 years, there remained that yawning gap between promises and performances and between pledges and deliveries.

Although next week's U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), also known as Rio+20, is by no means a pledging conference, there are lingering fears that all the best laid plans may fall apart if there is no financing to implement them.

The summit meeting of world leaders will take place Jun. 20-22 against the backdrop of a spreading global economic and credit crisis in Europe, with far reaching consequences in the United States and newly emerging countries such as China, India and Brazil.

"The Future We Want", to be adopted by world leaders next week, may well be a plan in desperate search of funding.

"The environmental crisis is as big a challenge as the financial crisis, and it might even be bigger and longer lasting," Ambassador Palitha Kohona, Sri Lanka's permanent representative to the United Nations, told IPS.

Ironically, he pointed out, both crises originated in the developed world due to the unrestrained pursuit of material well being.

And despite everything, the developed world is never short of prescriptions for others on how to cope with these crises, said Kohona, a member of the Sri Lanka delegation to UNCSD next week.

At a pre-Rio press conference Wednesday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said success requires international collaboration; it requires investment; it requires that countries exchange experiences and technology.

"We need progress on implementation," he added, and this "includes reaffirming past commitments and initiatives on trade, financing for development, technology transfer and capacity building."

But will these commitments materialise?

The Green Climate Fund (GCF), aimed at climate financing, has a target of 100 billion dollars through 2020. But what are its prospects?

Dr. Bjorn Lomborg, adjunct professor and head of the Copenhagen Consensus Center at the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark, told IPS the evidence from previous pledges is not promising.

First, the 100-billion-dollar ambition of the GCF was already much less than what most actors were talking about.

Second, it was promised far into the future – 2020, 11 years down the road.

Third, it was never fully financed (a lot was blithely assumed to come from private funders, who of course didn't actually pay up).

Fourth, even the one-tenth that was promised for 2010-12 – 10 billion dollars annually – has not really been forthcoming, and it seems only about one-third has been actually put forth.

Fifth, much of that money wasn't additional funds. And even the money that has been coming in is mostly badly used, Lomborg said.

Only 14 percent has gone for adaptation policies, which would truly help the third world, whereas most of the money has gone to providing carbon cuts that not only are mostly ineffective tools of themselves, but also help third world countries inefficiently far into the future.

"This is why it seems unlikely that the third world should want to be taken for another ride with at Rio+20 with grand promises of money, that turn out to be far out into the future, not forthcoming, not new, and not well used," he warned.

Ambassador Kohona told IPS that in the past, commitments made by developed countries to assist developing countries to escape the poverty trap have not been discharged with genuine enthusiasm.

"The commitment to transfer 0.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to developing countries, the Monterrey Accords, the commitments to realise the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), all remain to be delivered except in the case of a very few developed countries," he pointed out.

"What we need is the acknowledgement that if developed countries and developing countries do not work together, tomorrow will bring catastrophe."

Most developing countries, especially the smaller ones, need specific commitments to adjust and deal with climate change and environmental degradation, he added.

"The billions of dollars that were marshalled overnight to save the errant banks must again be mobilised to save humanity," he declared.



UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on governments to honour past promises on trade, development aid, technology transfer and capacity building. Credit: Shari Nijman/IPS

Dr. Lomborg said he hopes that developing countries insist that the summit should focus on the environmental issues that matter most to most people, i.e. air and water pollution, which causes about 13 percent of all deaths in the developing world, along with poverty, which causes both more than 25 percent of all deaths and untold environmental destruction.

"When people are poor, they don't have the luxury of worrying about environmental issues," he said.

"If your family is freezing, you will cut down the last tree for fuel; if they are starving, you will raze the forest to farm. With little certainty about the future, you will insure yourself by having more children to care for you," said Lomborg, author of "Cool It: the Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming".

"If we would decide to tackle air and water pollution, we would be well underway to handling the world's biggest environmental issues."

"And if we could focus on alleviating poverty through a successful Doha round (of trade talks), it could have a huge impact on global environmental policy," he added.

"We could not only make people better prepared to handle their immediate problems such as how to obtain food, clean water and medicine. They could also start to care about the environment."

Lomborg said recent history shows that in these circumstances people will reduce their pollution, stop cutting down forests and innovate better ways for everyone to live.

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