

# Reflections on the State of Agreement on Key Issues of Rio+20

Summary of Discussions from FES Retreat for UN Permanent Representatives on the Conference on Sustainable Development

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- The Retreat was organized by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and held in Greentree, Long Island, United States, on 30 September–1 October 2011.
- Representatives of 35 member states attended the Retreat as well as the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary General of the Rio+20 Conference, Ambassador Sha Zukang; the Director of FES, Dr. Werner Puschra; and other representatives from FES and UNCSD Secretariat.
- Two experts also participated in the meeting: Dr. Michael Dorsey, expert on environmental studies from Dartmouth College, and Mr. Soogil Young, Chairman of the Presidential Committee on Green Growth of South Korea.





## 1. Introduction

The objective of the Retreat was to provide an informal platform for candid, constructive dialogue among Member States on what Rio+20 can and should deliver. The core agenda of the retreat included discussions on: (i) identifying what the world needs from Rio+20; (ii) identifying critical areas of divergence and convergence among Member States; (iii) examining how best to integrate the objective and themes of the conference by creating synergies among them; and (iv) fostering a common — and concrete — vision of the Conference outcome. This Conference Report Summary provides a succinct record of the views expressed during the Retreat with the purpose of facilitating further discussion during the UNCSD preparatory process.

## 2. Main Topics of Discussion

The deliberations were preceded by the opening statements of Mr. Sha Zukang and Dr. Werner Puschra. Both underlined the need to respond to the millions of people worldwide who need sustainable development to get out of poverty and encouraged participants to identify concrete actions towards a green transition and sustainable consumption and production. They also drew attention to the importance of an adequate institutional framework conducive to implementation and pointed out the relevance of appropriate and sufficient means of implementation.

The presentations of the two keynote speakers focused on green economy and green growth. Dr. Michael Dorsey advocated for concrete proposals for a green economy which recognize the finite limits of the planet and address economic inequality between and within societies and generations. He cautioned that 20th century biodiversity “prospecting” had profited neither firms nor communities. Mr. Young explained the Republic of Korea’s national strategy and institutional framework for green growth. A number of initiatives have already kicked off, including restoration of rivers as well as projects on wind, solar and tidal energy. Rep of Korea is aiming at reducing substantially the reliance on oil and coal as energy sources and achieving a 30% reduction of GHG emissions by 2020.

The discussions elaborated on expectations for Rio+20, covered the two themes of the Conference and exchanged views on the content and format of the outcome document of the Conference as well as the procedures to facilitate agreement in the negotiation phase. A summary of these discussions is presented below.

## 3. Expectations for Rio+20

Many participants mentioned that UNCSD should cover broad sustainable development issues, benefit from the experiences gained in the past and build a strong vision for the future in order to achieve sustainable development within planetary boundaries. Human well-being should feature at the center of the debate at Rio+20, as well as a concern for the weakest members of the international community. A success in Rio will require that all countries have a stake in the conference outcome, which can be achieved by looking holistically at issues including inter alia climate change, energy access, food security, natural disasters, migration, and others. The broad nature of sustainable development calls for active engagement of different ministries in the conference and, as many participants noted, the engagement of the finance ministries is a difficult challenge.

## 4. Principles

Many participants underlined that the Conference should not renegotiate the principles of sustainable development, but rather reiterate the Rio principles, including Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. In this regard, the principle of intergenerational equity, as outlined in the Brundtland report, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities were particularly emphasized.

## 5. Integration of the Three Pillars

There was a general consensus on the need to ensure integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. It was noted that this would require a conducive institutional framework in the form of a high level body with the mandate to bring together agendas pertaining to three pillars of sustainable development. This will mean the participation of different ministers, and not only environment ministers, in the sustainable

development fora. This is going to be a big challenge, but could possibly be addressed by, for instance, providing a specific role and mandate to different ministries in sustainable development bodies.

## 6. Implementation

Re-affirming the commitment to sustainable development should begin with delivering on the existing commitments. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) is currently the only intergovernmental body mandated to review implementation of the sustainable development agenda. Any reform should ensure that this element is not only maintained but further strengthened. Monitoring implementation — through for example setting up timelines, benchmarks and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — can be an important vehicle to push implementation.

## 7. Involvement of All Stakeholders

Participation of all stakeholders was perceived by many participants as crucial to the success of the conference. In particular, Major Groups<sup>1</sup> have an important role to play and thus more innovative ways should be found to involve them in both the preparation of the conference and the conference itself. In addition, some participants mentioned that the Conference could provide a platform for voluntary initiatives, pledges and commitments from both private sector and civil society, especially in the four days between the Third PrepCom and the Conference.

## 8. The Role of Media, Education and Information

Education and the media have an important role to play as key elements for reenergizing societies in the area of sustainable development, especially as behavioral shifts will be necessary. Regional commissions and regional organizations as well as parliamentarians and local authorities are also major players in disseminating information on sustainable development.

<sup>1</sup> Agenda 21 recognized nine major groups: business and industry, children and youth, farmers, indigenous people, local authorities, NGOs, scientific and technological community, women, workers and trade unions.

## 9. Partnerships

Several participants emphasized the need to reinvigorate the enthusiasm in partnerships and to enhance their role and effectiveness in triggering sustainable development and ensuring implementation. Ways to outreach to civil society and the private sector in particular should be explored. Some participants suggested the creation of a platform at the Conference for announcing concrete partnership initiatives by all stakeholders. Partnerships were considered especially important for addressing the vulnerability of certain groups of countries, like LDCs, SIDS and mountain countries, since they often find themselves on the receiving end of the negative impacts of global problems (such as land degradation, desertification, drought and the impact of melting of glaciers).

## 10. Monitoring Progress

Some participants were of the view that the world should be able to translate its vision of sustainable development into universal Sustainable Development Goals, complemented with a concrete action plan, timeline and roadmap to insure implementation. However, any monitoring process should rely on a good balance between national sovereignty and universal commitments. To achieve this balance, a suggestion was put forward to have each country create a program emphasizing its own national priorities. Then, a tailor-made system at the international level could contribute towards monitoring these programs.

## 11. Sustainable Development Goals

Many participants indicated that sustainable development goals (SDG) could be relevant for priority areas like food security, energy, agriculture, water, sustainable cities, among others. There were however two main concerns: (i) initiating an SDG framework prior to 2015 could undermine the MDG process; (ii) getting the negotiations on technical issues regarding SDGs and agreeing on SDGs may prove infeasible.

To address these concerns, two alternatives were suggested: (i) to launch the process of SDGs at the Conference without agreeing on the SDGs themselves; or (ii) to agree at the Conference on SDGs on relevant areas

not covered by the MDGs. In the latter option, the post-2015 development agenda could then encompass some SDGs as well as those MDGs which are lagging behind. Overall, participants emphasized the need for further discussion on the relation between MDGs and SDGs to make sure that the two processes will not compete with each other. There was also some discussion on how the Rio+20 outcome will fit into the post-2015 agenda. Integrating SDGs in this framework could contribute to making this agenda conducive to sustainable development.

## 12. Green Economy

The discussion on a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication stressed the need for a new paradigm for economic growth, reflecting social, distributional and environmental dimensions. In particular, it was recognized that GDP growth does not automatically translate into poverty eradication and should not be used as the only standard measure for development. Some suggested the need to revisit this concept in its entirety while building on existing initiatives. Others underlined that concerns of developing countries still have to be addressed, especially loss of jobs, new conditionalities, flexibility of implementation and policy space. Important issues of adequate financing, technology transfer and capacity building were also discussed with reference to green economy. One participant cautioned about putting a price on the environment and on natural resources as the pursuit of sustainable development should respect the right of nature

## 13. Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development

Real political commitment was considered fundamental to effectively reforming institutions and moving away from business as usual. The discussion suggested a balanced approach between reforming existing institutions and creating new structures to support and complement existing ones. It was also proposed that the reform should be pragmatic: revising the UN charter is a lengthy process and thus a reform of the ECOSOC may not be a wise way forward. However, the IFSD reform should not be seen in isolation of the ongoing ECOSOC reform. Other proposals

for reforming the current institutional architecture on sustainable development included:

- a. To create an intergovernmental forum at a high level, like a SD council, with a mandate covering the three pillars and inter-relations among them to ensure that there is an intergovernmental body mandated to review implementation of the sustainable development agenda;
- b. To integrate, in a more coherent manner, relevant parts of the UN system;
- c. To engage all stakeholders in the institutional structures made responsible for sustainable development;
- d. To engage the International Financial Institutions in the development and implementation of the sustainable development agenda;
- e. To increase the participation of ministries of finance, development, social affairs and foreign affairs in the sustainable development fora by creating a specific role for them in the intergovernmental body on sustainable development;
- f. To strengthen the role of the UN agencies and Regional Commissions on the ground in order to enhance implementation;
- g. To strengthen the environmental pillar by: (i) strengthening UNEP, especially its scientific base; (ii) transforming UNEP into a specialized agency with a coordination mandate over all environmental conventions; (iii) addressing the political aspects of the environmental pillar by setting meetings of environmental institutions in New York, where the political agenda is set.
- h. To establish an effective bridge between science and policy-making by creating a space to discuss the state of the planet, where scientific evidence can be assessed to inform policy makers.

## 14. Planetary Champion

With the objective to safeguard the “state of planet”, several participants mentioned that the planet needs a sustainable development champion. This “champion” could raise awareness and mobilize political support. In this regard, a proposal was made to appoint a high commissioner for sustainable development.

## 15. Means of Implementation

It was noted that implementing sustainable development and transitioning towards green economy will require substantial resources — finance, technology transfer and capacity building. Those are most necessary for the countries with the least capacity, especially LDCs. There were proposals for: strengthening international cooperation for sustainable development; relying on traditional forms of cooperation such as ODA; using public resources to leverage private sources of financing; but also using new and innovative sources of financing. There was also one proposal to establish a tax on international financial transactions.

## 16. Outcome Document

There was a general call for a forward-looking, action-oriented document, focused on practical results and leading the world to a sustainable future. It should reach to the people and not be constrained by policy and technical language. Participants suggested that the outcome document should reiterate political commitment; be based on the Rio principles, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities; take stock of progress and gaps including new challenges; include a road map on green economy with flexibility for countries to apply their own options; address the institutional framework of sustainable development; and outline a way forward for accessing resources, ensuring technology transfer, and strengthening capacities. Poverty eradication should assume center stage of the agreement.

## 17. Structure of the Outcome Document

There was recognition that the structure of the outcome document is important and should be discussed and

agreed upon at an early stage. Several suggestions on the structure were put forward during the Retreat:

- a. To organize the document according to key overarching concepts such as poverty eradication, integration of the three pillars, etc.;
- b. To structure the document following a sectoral approach (the Monterey Consensus document could be a possible model for consideration);
- c. To start the document by providing a vision followed by the action plan (on the latter, the principle of “simpler the better” is preferable);
- d. To divide the document on the vision, the goals and the institutions;
- e. To build the document around five major blocks, namely (i) an introduction noting agreed principles, (ii) a list of goals related to energy, food, and others, (iii) a green economy roadmap, complemented by a toolbox (regulations, certification, public procurement, etc.), (iv) a section on institutional framework for sustainable development; (v) a section on cooperation for development including capacity building, technology transfer and financing.

## 18. Negotiations

To expedite convergence of views and compromise solutions, participants suggested avoiding a “rolling text” that is being constantly changed with everybody adding to the text. Instead, the co-chairs should control the process and propose the revised text on the basis of discussions during negotiations. The Bureau co-chairs should make sure that the discussions remain focused. Some participants encouraged as much informal contact as possible, using the available time to understand differences of opinion on critical issues. It was also judged useful to reflect on how to support negotiations by establishing an informal consultation with the major groups.





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