

Challenges and promises of Rio+20 summit

By Dr Hezri Adnan

Malaysia hopes to play an active part in shaping the outcome of the UN conference on sustainable development

SEVEN months from now, world leaders will convene at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), also known as the "Rio+20" summit.

The landmark gathering in June will take place 20 years after the ground-breaking 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The 1992 Earth Summit produced the global imprimatur of sustainable development, the Rio Declaration and the action plan blueprint Agenda 21.

It also gave birth to three international treaties, including the influential UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. Although the original Rio was a watershed event that strategically outlined collaborative actions to address sustainable development, gaps still exist today.

The patterns of consumption and production of the global economy heavily stress key ecosystems. In addition, although global wealth has increased by 60 per cent since 1992, it has not translated into alleviating extreme poverty in many parts of the world.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon aptly described the current model of economic growth as a "global suicide pact". Judging from the Copenhagen and Cancun climate change meetings, international sustainability negotiations have approached a cul-de-sac.

In order to move from the current impasse and implementation deficit, the world needs to secure a stronger political commitment to sustainable development.

If we fail, the social, environmental and political costs could be irreparable. But what are the promises of Rio+20 in confronting the failures of the original Rio meeting?

Apart from securing a renewed political commitment, the Rio+20 conference aims to assess the progress of Agenda 21, identify shortcomings in implementation of the agreements of major summits on sustainable development, and address new and emerging challenges.

For meaningful and concrete actions, Rio+20 will also have to focus on two action-oriented themes. The first, green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and the second, institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD).

This transition to a green economy received broad support when it was announced in the UN general assembly last year particularly from European countries, South Korea and the UN Environment Programme. Some G-77 countries expressed reservations that certain interpretations may lead to green protectionism and aid conditionality or potentially undervalue the social pillar of sustainable development.

To its credit, UNEP pacified this fear by defining a green economy as "one which is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive".

This inevitably means that entrenched thinking and strategic foot-dragging can no longer be an option because the shift to a green economy also represents a race between countries to be in the driving

seat leading the transition to sustainability.

With regards to IFSD, UN member states would like the Rio+20 summit to be the launching platform for an enhanced environmental structure at the international level. Taking advantage of the summit's momentum, deliberations and negotiations will involve broad debates addressing the reorganisation of the UN system and streamlining the proliferation of multilateral agreements.

Recently, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak pledged Malaysia's support for the creation of a specialised UN agency called the World Environment Organisation (WEO).

Malaysia played a key role in the original Rio meeting in 1992, particularly in outlining the accountability differential for developed and developing countries through the principle "common-but-differentiated responsibility".

In recent climate change negotiations, there has been a move to emphasise "respective capabilities", blurring the distinction between North and South, and their responsibilities to pay for pollution emitted.

Indeed, the proposed themes for Rio+20 are fundamental but also very controversial.

To broaden participation in the Rio+20 summit, a series of preparatory processes are taking place at global, regional and national levels. On the global stage, the process of submitting ideas is open to governments, UN organisations, and representatives of major groups.

Following the Nov 1 deadline for suggestions, UN will prepare a compilation text that will be the basis for a zero draft for the negotiations.

At the national level, the Malaysian government, with technical assistance from the Centre for Global Sustainability Studies of Universiti Sains Malaysia and ISIS Malaysia, had thus far organised three consultation workshops to prepare the country for effective participation in Rio next year.

While much remains to be decided, there appears to be clear interest in and momentum behind the 2012 conference.

What happens between now and June next year will help define expectations. As an influential voice in the first Rio meeting, the question now is can Malaysia shape the outcome of Rio+20?