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Rio+20 green with envy-ronment

BRAZIL'S DIPLOMATIC BRILLIANCE: Malaysia should capitalise on public-private partnerships

By Dr Hezri Adnan



THE recent G20 Summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, saw emerging economies, such as China, India and Brazil, pledging US\$63 billion (RM195 billion) to the International Monetary Fund's global firewall fund.

This sum was more than Japan's capital injection, as the largest single contributor, in the fight to contain the eurozone sovereign debt crisis from spreading.

United States President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron, together with other leaders of the G20 at the summit, vowed to resolve the crisis by promoting growth and jobs. In the same week, 8,000km southeast of Mexico in Rio de Janeiro, some 40,000 people attended the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20.

Among these were diplomats from 188 participating countries. They were tasked by their capitals to negotiate the conference outcome document called The Future We Want.

Twenty years after the seminal Rio Summit in 1992, scientific evidence raises alarm bells about the functioning of the Earth system, which is now at a greater risk than before. Rio+20, therefore, seeks to revive the international commitment to sustainable development often seen as faltering.

By pushing the notion of a green economy, the UN is also arguing that the financial crisis presents an opportunity to reform the economic model for sustainable development. There were conspicuous gaps between aspiration and reality in Rio. The negotiation was rife with conflicting interests and tensions between rich countries and the developing world.

Issues such as green economy, the creation of a new UN environment agency, technology transfer and finance mechanisms had become grounds of bitter dispute. The poor were simply distrustful of the rich.

Just a day before the arrival of the heads of state, only 28 per cent of the negotiation text was agreed upon. The collapse of the intergovernmental negotiation could sound the death knell for the multilateral process on sustainable development.

Happily, this did not happen, thanks to the diplomatic brilliance of Brazil as the conference president. Countries eventually reaffirmed the Rio principles, renewed their political commitment to sustainable development, agreed to establish a set of sustainable development goals and established a high-level political forum on sustainable development.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon declared the conference "a success", and "saw the further evolution of an undeniable global movement for change".

Many observers do not share the view of the UN chief. For some, the outcome document contained "283 paragraphs of fluff" without targets, timelines or guidelines for achieving any of its aspirations.

There was also no new money put on the table from the formal negotiation. The head of Greenpeace International did not mince his words by calling the conference "a failure of epic proportions".

Even before the Rio de Janeiro dust began to settle, a swathe of media analyses denounced the lacklustre outcome of Rio+20.

It was solemnly labelled as "disappointing", "a political charade" and "lacking ambition" in news headlines across the world.

It is too convenient to write off the outcome of the global summit in its immediate aftermath.

A more important task is to ask how the future generation would judge the legacy of Rio+20.

Two lessons from Rio will shape the future debate on sustainable development. First, most policy-makers do not consider sustainability a top priority comparable to securing economic stability.

Although Rio+20 was earlier on billed as a milestone opportunity to confront sustainable development, the absence of prominent leaders, such as Obama, Merkel and Cameron, is a tell-tale sign of how Rio+20 pales in comparison with the G20 Summit.

Encouragingly, however, while political leaders are preoccupied by restoring financial health, an estimated 2,700 business leaders attended Rio+20 to fill a funding gap left by cash-light governments.

Together with other stakeholders, the business sector is expected to mobilise more than US\$500 billion pledged in the Rio+20 voluntary commitments to implement sustainable development.

At the national level, Malaysia should capitalise on its already vigorous public-private-partnerships to move towards a green economy.

To do so, a stronger social and environmental costing is needed to ensure that tangible benefits of the private sector investment can be shared by communities beyond corporate boardrooms.

Second, the power balance in international politics is shifting. Parallel to the growing role of China, India and Brazil at the G20 Summit, the voices of G77 countries were assertive and influential in the Rio+20 process.

Yet, in a leaderless world, the UN consensus process is reduced to a zero-sum game with our ailing planet as the inevitable victim. There is no silver-bullet solution to preserve the integrity of environmental multilateralism.

Countries like Malaysia, adept at maintaining economic growth while protecting the environment, should step into the global discourse on sustainability as an enlightened broker for the future that we really want.