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Cinderella in the UN

MANY of those in touch with the preparations for the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), now scheduled for Vienna in August 1979, have been concerned with the apparently low priority given to possible contributions from the world scientific community. Recently, however, there would seem to have been a change of heart, if not within the UN's own Office of Science and Technology, at least on the part of Mr da Costa, the Conference's Secretary General.

This much became apparent at the meeting in Geneva last November of the Advisory Committee on the Applications of Science and Technology, ACAST, the United Nations' informal committee. ACAST was one of the few concrete results of the last big general conference on the Application of Science and Technology for the Benefit of Less-developed Areas (UNCSAT) held in 1963. Rather to the surprise of ACAST's members, who had previously found him somewhat inclined to play down the part that scientists might play in 1979, da Costa went to some pains to stress the important contribution they could and should make not only at the Conference itself, but also in the preparation of the national papers that will provide the principal input to UNCSTD. He spoke, too, of the "necessity to ensure the participation of scientists at the forthcoming session of the UNCSTD Preparatory Committee", which "will allow them to speak alongside diplomats at a very early stage in the Conference preparations".

In fact, competition for the floor of meetings is less likely to be between scientists and diplomats than between scientists and 'experts' in the development business who represent, in UN terms, the UNCTAD and UNIDO lobbies.

The UN is still agonising about whether it should have a science and technology policy at all. This is the subject of an important report from ACAST that will be considered by the Committee on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD—the secretariat of UNCSTD) at its meeting which starts on 23 January in Geneva. While ACAST itself believes that "there is a need for a policy which would guide and facilitate the development and application of science and technology by and within the United Nations system for the benefit of its Member States" the various members of the UN family, and in particular the specialised agencies, seem

decidedly lukewarm if not frankly antagonistic to this idea. The fact is that, although themselves almost without exception based to a greater or less extent on science or its immediate applications, they are notoriously jealous of their own sovereignty in matters of policy—indeed, it sometimes seems that this is almost the only thing on which they can agree.

Nonetheless, if the agencies which purport to advise and assist the developing countries in applying science and technology cannot agree at least to certain priorities in this field, much of their effort will be wasted and the developing countries themselves will still lack the guidance they so desperately need on where to go and how to set about getting there. In this context, the new report from ACAST is well worth careful study and consideration, as much outside the UN system as within.

As to ACAST itself, after a period when, again within the UN system, its very usefulness has been called in question, the recent meeting should have dispelled any doubts as to its value. Its members do not sit as official government representatives but in their own right as scientists of international repute, and covering a very wide range of disciplines. This also seems to have been recognised by Mr da Costa when he stressed the value of ACAST's role in "acting as a bridge between the Conference Secretariat and the scientific community" particularly with regard to the participation in 1979 of the major non-governmental organisations such as ICSU, the Pugwash Conference and the World Federation of Engineering Organisations (WFEO), all of whom found it worthwhile to send observers to the ACAST meeting.

One point which may be of concern to British scientists is that at present no scientists from this country is a member of ACAST. This is partly because in inviting scientists to sit on this Committee, the UN Secretary General seeks to avoid the impression of any permanent 'national' representation. In part, too, even ACAST is affected by the move to include more representation of the developing countries among its members (in fact the Chairman of the recent meeting was Dr Chagula of Tanzania). Be that as it may, there is little doubt that when, as will surely happen sooner or later, there is any suggestion that a British scientist should once again be invited to sit on this, the only UN body that can speak for science and scientists, it should be warmly welcomed. □