

UNCSTD prepares for action

A preparatory committee met in Geneva recently to decide on the agenda for UNCSTD. Peter Collins reports

SCHEDULED for Vienna in August next year, the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, UNCSTD, could be a milestone towards bridging the ideological gap between the countries of the northern and southern hemispheres. These are the two camps in which the Member nations of the UN seem perpetually divided: the 'Group of 77' (now in fact 103) developing countries and the western and eastern industrialised countries.

Governments are the focus of the preparations for UNCSTD. They have been involved largely through the organisation of seminars at every level from the national or sub-regional to full scale regional meetings. These have been organised or supported not only by the UN itself or such bodies as UNCTAD, but in many cases also by UNESCO. What this sometimes rather frenzied preparatory activity will lead to is not clear, but the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr Joao da Costa, has already said that he considers the preparatory period as part of the whole Conference procedure. This should mean that when delegates finally get to Vienna, they may have a reasonable idea of what they want to say, or expect to hear—which has not always been the case with such mammoth meetings in the past.

Meanwhile, as a result of the recent meeting, the agenda for Vienna are now firmly established, with five sub-

stantive items for discussion: the part of science and technology in development; suitable institutional arrangements and possible new forms of international cooperation in the application of science and technology; the ways and means of using the UN system in this field; science and technology for the future; and a programme of action based on the conclusions of the Conference.

The original intention was to limit discussion under these headings to not more than five 'subject areas'. However, so much confusion seems to have arisen in this respect, and the proposals from many developing countries have been so diffuse, that no such neat arrangement has been possible. At their first preparatory meetings, the five regional Economic Commissions agreed on priority subjects and a first task at Geneva was to accommodate their ideas for the Conference.

The result is a group of subject areas so broad as to make discussion in depth of any one subject almost impossible: food and agriculture; natural resources including energy; health, human settlements and environment; transport and communications; and industrialisation including the production of capital goods. Each of the first three is further divided into four sub-topics, in such a way that there may be no aspect of development, discussion of which may not



This logo designed by Rashid-ud Din of Pakistan has been adopted as the official symbol of the Conference. It depicts the globe in the form of a retort held by calipers and surrounded by the olive leaves of the United Nations emblem

consume time at Vienna. The result is a list that differs very little, in effect, from that covered by the UNCSAT Conference of 1963, except that there is no special mention of education and training, often considered the most essential prerequisite for the useful application of science and technology anywhere.

Action plan

The item on which the preparatory meeting most nearly broke down was one on which nothing definite can be said until the Conference itself, namely the 'action plan' which, ever since Stockholm in 1972, has become a *sine qua non* for any major international gathering of this type. After a long and apparently quite acrimonious discussion, the Group of 77 came up with a draft resolution, not so much about what they felt the action plan should contain, as about the obstacles to development which it

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should be concerned to solve. In this text they allowed that many of these obstacles, at the national level in particular, are inherent in the undeveloped condition, and are no longer, as has often been claimed in the past, just the result of colonialism or the behaviour of the multinational corporations. Even so, the text eventually submitted was unacceptable to the western group. However, a revised version put forward by the Conference Secretary General himself was more satisfactory; almost everyone was able to agree to it and all was well, at least for the time being.

National papers

From a practical point of view, the way is now clear for the real preparations to start. What this entails is indicated by the scheme of documentation presented to the recent meeting. Basically, this involves the preparation of national papers, which have been defined as "national analyses of relevant socioeconomic problems which may be solved with the help of science and technology". Together with equivalent papers at regional level, they will form the backbone for the Conference documentation. This falls into five categories. The first comprises the so-called 'official' documents, prepared or commissioned by the Conference secretariat, and covering the five major items of the agenda detailed above.

The most interesting of these to the pure scientist will be the report on Science and Technology for the Future. The recent meeting was shown a paper on this subject prepared by a group of advisers invited by da Costa, but it did not make a particularly good impression and it is not clear who will produce the final version. This is seen as a book of 200 to 300 pages, equivalent to the Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos volume produced for the Stockholm Environment Conference, and available for the general public. At present, da Costa admitted, there are no funds to cover its publication within his budget for the Conference.

In the second category come the national and regional reports, and three important papers, specifically commissioned at the request of the Preparatory Committee. They deal with: the present role of the United Nations system in science and technology; the human rights aspects of science and technology; and an evaluation of the results achieved so far from previous UN conferences in the scientific and technological field.

Then come three groups of background documents: first, those from the UN Specialised Agencies and other members of the UN system; then, re-

ports from inter-governmental organisations (such as OECD and EEC); and lastly, the submissions of the principal non-governmental organisations—The International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), Pugwash, and the like. These last could well be particularly valuable from the point of view of the scientific community, since it is in them that scientists will be able to put their points of view, free from the restraints imposed by government policy. Despite assurances that there would not be a vast mountain of documentation for delegates to consume, even the basic 'official' papers will amount to some 700 pages, and the grand total, at a rough but conservative estimate, will be around 5,000!

Potentially, the group of reports from the components of the UN system should be of the greatest interest to the developing countries. After all, it is they who, together with the bilateral agencies, have been applying science and technology to the development of the Third World for the past 25 years, and the sum total of their experience has never yet been made freely available. It is here that the political divisions within the system are most regrettable.

The Specialised Agencies, other than UNESCO, appear to be taking a disinterested attitude towards the Conference, whereas UNCTAD and UNIDO have from the start been more closely and deliberately involved—admittedly, at the express request of the Secretary General, who has turned to them for assistance. The result has been that many governments of the developing countries have come to regard the Conference as primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with the transfer of technology.

French opposition to science

As to the Conference itself, there seems to be a large measure of agreement with da Costa's insistence that it is essentially a political affair. What many people may not realise is that it is just for this reason that the voice of the scientific community must be heard. Too often, major political decisions have been taken at large scale conferences sponsored by the UN, only to prove unworkable when it has come down to the hard facts of putting them into practice. Yet there is still considerable opposition to the idea that science as such should have a voice at Vienna.

The French, for example, are among those who would remove item 4 (Science and Technology for the Future) from the agenda completely, nor are they in favour of the non-governmental organisations being in-

involved in the Conference. No one, of course, expects a series of decisions that can bring about immediate changes in the developing countries. The Conference, as the United States representative put it, is the commencement, not the culmination, of UN's new approach to the problems it will discuss, and any resolutions taken will be framed in that light.

Scientist joins secretariat

While the governments interested in the Conference will be preparing their national papers, deciding what it is they really want from Vienna in 1979, the secretariat itself has a long and tough task ahead. One bonus is that Guy Gresford, at present senior scientific adviser to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra, will shortly join the secretariat as deputy to da Costa.

Gresford's appointment not only means that his long experience and diplomatic skills will be available to the hard-pressed secretariat in New York (and thereby raise their apparently somewhat low morale), but also should ensure that the point of view of science and technology will not be lost in the welter of political manoeuvring that seems inseparable from all such meetings.

Moreover, it seems likely that Gresford, as a former member of the UN top scientists' advisory body, ACAST, and as a person of many years experience inside the UN itself, will be in a position to see that something is done about the greatest gap in the Conference preparations to date. This is the lack of public information about every aspect of the Conference, not only to mass media but also, as several delegates at Geneva remarked, to governments preparing to take part in the meeting.

Even the Secretary General observed that he had been poorly served in this respect, and the Specialised Agencies seemed to be doing a better job than the people in New York.

One activity that may eventually make some difference in this respect is the colloquium proposed by ICSU, to be held if possible between the third session of the preparatory commission, in September this year, and the fourth and final session, in February 1979. This should not only make it possible to clarify and formulate the views of the scientific community well in advance of the actual meeting, but may also provide an opportunity for the kind of publicity that is going to be sorely needed if what happens in Vienna later that year is not going to be dismissed, by the media and the public they serve, as "just another vast United Nations jamboree". □