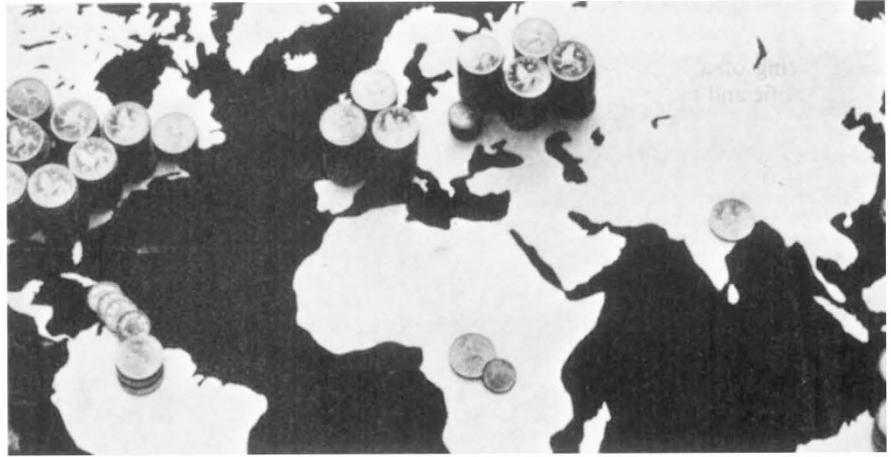


The poor meet the rich

'Nature' correspondents report from Vienna on the opening sessions of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development



Third World: we will negotiate

DELEGATES to UNCSTD from a wide range of Third World countries agreed at a meeting in Bucharest last week that, at least at the start of the conference, they will bury economic and ideological differences behind a common negotiating strategy. They also agreed to stand firm behind the developing countries' proposals for a draft plan of action to emerge from UNCSTD — although they are prepared to negotiate on the plan's main demands rather than invite confrontation by sticking to a hard line.

The meeting was organised by the Group of 77 which has been negotiating on behalf of over 120 developing countries during the UNCSTD preparatory meetings. Representatives from the developed countries were relieved to hear that the Group of 77 would not seek initial confrontation. Although the developed countries are not prepared to accept all the demands that the developing countries have included in the proposed plan of action, they are keen, for political and economic reasons, to engineer a successful outcome to the conference.

Before the Bucharest meeting, some developing countries had complained that the proposed draft plan did not reflect their particular concerns. (The draft is the basis for the negotiations currently taking place in Vienna). Some African countries, for example, had complained that the proposals were too heavily weighted towards measures to benefit the more advanced of the Group of 77 countries — for example, with conditions governing technology transfer — and would not do enough to meet the technical needs of the poorest countries.

The Bucharest meeting agreed to recommend that the plenary session in Vienna establish a special working group to look at proposals for areas in which greater scientific and technical effort should be focused. In return the African groups agreed to support the Group of 77's proposals for a new funding system and new institutional arrangements for science and technology with the UN. Both proposals will be examined by UNCSTD's two main committees.

Members of the Group of 77 still differ,

however, over how the new institutional arrangements would operate to assure the politically weaker countries adequate control over research funds and their application.

A statement summarising the demands of the plan of action was issued at the end of the meeting. It says that inequalities in all fields of international economic relations are especially acute in science and technology. Despite the efforts of the developing nations there has been no real progress towards setting up a New International Economic Order with science and technology forming an integral part. The statement expresses alarm at the large fraction of global research expenditure devoted to defence and asks for "free and full access to scientific and technical knowledge, discoveries and innovations".

International cooperation should also play an important part in harnessing science and technology to the social objectives of the developing countries, the statement says. "For this, global and fundamental structural changes are required in the existing distribution of scientific and technological capacities in the world, in order to ensure increased participation by the developing countries in the quest for new scientific and technological knowledge".

In line with the suggested plan of action, the statement urges that international law governing technology transfer should be "restructured" in line with the goals of the developing countries who should be able to participate in financing mechanisms set up for scientific and technological development. The statement also urges support for measures to increase scientific and technical cooperation between developing countries. It says that practical measures "should be undertaken to support the cause of national liberation of peoples and territories under foreign occupation, control and domination, racism and racial discrimination, to enable them also to benefit from the application of science and technology for their development".

David Dickson

Arab group expel Egypt and establish Libya as spokesman

The decisions taken at the Tenth Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers, held in Fez during April, are now being implemented by a strong 'Arab group' that has emerged at UNCSTD. The Islamic conference decided to boycott Egypt on all issues and support the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

In the past Egypt has assumed a natural leadership on Arab issues, in the field of science and technology, and this is the first time it has faced a determined and joint opposition to its efforts to lead the Arab group. Libya was unanimously elected to lead the group last week-end despite the fact that, nominated as a vice-president for North Africa, it was absent from its first meeting.

Alienation of Egypt from the Arab group has provided even stronger Arab support for the PLO delegation to UNCSTD. "We are determined to get a nation-state status for the PLO" a member of the Syrian delegation declared. At their first meeting, the group decided not to articulate an OPEC (or more appropriately, AOPEC) position. OPEC Arab countries will play a low-key role where we are allowed to do so" and will merge their identities within the Arab group.

The group also decided to give full support to the announced position of the Group of 77. Although the stance taken by the Group of 77 is a little too radical for some of the more conservative Arab states, like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, these states have been persuaded to support the Group of 77 as much as possible. Similarly Syria, which has shown considerable opposition to some declarations of the Group of 77, has decided to overlook its objections and support the decisions of the Arab group. Dr Shakir Fahm, Syrian Minister of Higher Education and leader of the Syrian delegation to UNCSTD says, "now is the time for the developing countries to show