

Programme for an International Centre

A MEETING at the Royal Society in London which finished earlier this week seems to have laid the foundations for what may be a unique international research centre—the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology at Nairobi. The scheme, which has been hatching for the past two years, will eventually take the form of a research establishment on the campus of University College, Nairobi, but under the management of a consortium of scientific academies from Europe and the United States as well as from East Africa.

Although it will be some time before the future of the centre is financially assured, the first research fellows will begin work in the next few days, using for the time being rooms provided by scientific departments at the university. The governing body, which will by now have met in Nairobi, is also hoping to be able this week to authorize the expenditure of \$10,000 provided by two Dutch universities for the construction of a temporary research building on the site earmarked for the construction of the main centre. It is hoped that before the end of the year, three or four research fellows will be at work under the direction of Professor Thomas Odhiambo, professor of insect physiology at University College, Nairobi.

Unlike many other research establishments, established over the years in Africa, the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology is not primarily aimed at problems of local significance but, rather, at matters of long term scientific benefit. Professor Carroll L. Wilson, the chairman of the governing board of the international centre, explained earlier this week in London that the scientific interests of the people chiefly concerned with the research programme of the institute were by good chance of a kind that might yield practical benefits to the region in which the studies would be carried out, but that the immediate reason for siting the centre at Nairobi was the happy coincidence of opportunities for research on tropical insects and the enthusiasm of the university, and particularly of Professor Odhiambo, for this project. In short, valuable though the proposed centre may be as an illustration of how national academies of science may collaborate with each other on work of value to developing nations, the Nairobi centre would not easily be replicated elsewhere.

To begin with, the research programme includes the study of insect hormones which control growth and reproduction, particularly in tsetse flies and locusts. There is also a plan for providing facilities for the study of pheromones, insect behaviour, mosquito genetics and the chemistry of the plant products which can function as insect hormones. Although the breadth of this research programme has been determined by the need somehow to bring together the kind of interdisciplinary interests likely in the long run to yield practical as well as intellectual benefits, it is also recognized that much of the momentum for the development of the centre will be provided by the interests of those scientists who are involved with the centre either as members of the governing board, as directors of research responsible to the director but not necessarily living at Nairobi and by the members of

the advisory council who are for practical purposes delegates of national academies of science.

As research projects of developing countries go, the Nairobi centre is an ambitious undertaking. In the next five years, it is hoped to be able to spend £474,000 on capital equipment, and that recurrent expenditure will amount to £312,000 a year by the end of this period. Although the full time staff of the institute at present allowed for in the budget amounts to fewer than a dozen paid research fellows, it is intended that the centre should be at the hub of a network of research in insect physiology involving not merely the laboratories at Nairobi but also those which have become centres of excellence in the nations with national academies contributing to the management of the centre. One particular feature of the scheme is that for the appointment of African scientists to fellowships allowing them to carry out research at the postdoctoral level in the laboratories of scientists associated with the centre, usually as directors of research, on the understanding that after a spell abroad, they will return to Africa. In this way, it is hoped that the centre will demonstrate its intention to be of cultural and educational value to the region as well as—possibly in the long run—of practical help with the solution of African problems as well.

The origins of the project are interesting in themselves. The first stimulus seems to have been a paper presented by Dr Carl Djerassi to the Pugwash Conference in Sweden in September 1967 and later summarized in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (January 1968, p. 22). Djerassi argued that the setting up of centres for basic research recognized internationally to be of high quality would benefit developing countries by demonstrating that scientific development does not have to recapitulate the pattern of change observed in developed countries, by providing help with practical problems and by providing opportunities for educational advance in the region as well as serving as means of keeping good scientists at home. By all accounts, one of the first proposals was that Nairobi should become an international centre but that it should be chiefly concerned with oceanography. Professor Odhiambo seems to have been the first to argue that Nairobi was especially suited to a study of insect physiology and ecology. In the past two years, the project has been vigorously supported by the National Academy of Sciences in the United States and by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

At the international committee meeting in London this week, the governing board emphasized that the project would not be thrown open to all potential members but only to those academies which are likely to have an important scientific contribution to make to the work of the Nairobi centre. The speed with which all these plans can be brought to fruition will depend very much on the response of the United Nations Development Fund to an application for funds which is to be made and on the willingness of the charitable foundations to help. In the meantime, it is clear that there is enough steam in the project for it to be able to get under way with *ad hoc* gifts of equipment, research facilities and bits and pieces of money.