Science at the UN: coordination or chaos?

Peter Collins reports on the likely demise of the UN's only scientific advisory body, 'ACAST's. Who will replace it?

"AT least we should be represented at our own funeral" remarked the chairman of ACAST's recent meeting in Geneva. For this, the United Nation's Advisory Committee on the Application of Science and Technology, is almost certainly one of the bodies likely to disappear in the restructuring to which its parent body, ECOSOC (the Economic and Social Council) is now being submitted. In this process ACAST has no say, and may find few friends to speak up on its behalf: government delegates as a whole, and especially those of the developing countries who hold a voting majority, do not like independent committees. Be that as it may, the abolition of ACAST at the present juncture would be most unfortunate. Its recent meeting was one of the liveliest and most useful since its foundation, and its discussions had an air of realism and urgency often lacking in past. This was perhaps due to the presence of several new members of this individually selected body, invited to replace some of those who had given it the reputation of representing the scientific establishment, with few original ideas and, at times, little apparent awareness of the trends and possibilities of modern science and technology.

In search of harmony

One of the major subjects discussed was the matter of policy for science and technology within the UN system itself. ECOSOC went on record some time ago to the effect that "the planning of activities in the various organisations of the United Nations should be harmonised and gradually integrated into a United Nations science and technology policy".

However, the idea of a centrally-controlled, general policy for science and technology within the system is widely considered to be impracticable, even if indeed it is desirable. What is seen as a reasonable objective is the harmonisation of policies within and between the various parts of the system. Some decisions on this subject are expected to form part of the Programme of Action for UNCSTD next year, and some sort of closer coordination in this field is also seen as essential for the evolution of the "new international economic order", in which the whole UN system and its member governments are now involved.

When it came to the means of bringing about such harmonisation, ACAST considered three main possibilities. The first of these was creation of a new agency charged with the overall coordination of science and technology for the entire system. ACAST commented that "experience in the United Nations (as well as with almost all organisations) is that new agencies become concerned not only with their own survival but also with increasing their influence and activities."

The second possibility, the suggestion of setting up an organisation for science and technology equivalent to the UN Environment Programme, was looked on somewhat more favourably. But to be effective it would sooner or later require, as has UNEP, a fund, and it is unlikely that member governments would agree to the creation of yet another large fund with all its administrative costs and the need for constant checks on the validity of the operations in which it might become involved. In any event, such a programme would have to rely on inputs from the rest of the system, and would need to have sufficient political or other support "to ensure consistency among the various agencies objectives and strategies through its decisions regarding funding and through coordination".

Much the most attractive, at least under present circumstances, would appear to be the third possibility, defined as a Centre for Concerted Action and Coordination on Science and Technology. Its purpose would be to systemise and synthesise information on all science and technology programmes and strategies throughout the system; to keep the Secretary-General advised of what was going on and what were the objectives and sub-goals of the other organisations within the system, relating these to the overall objectives; and to maintain contacts with the scientific and technical community, including intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations.

Questions involving research could be referred to other organisations within or outside the system, or, suggest ACAST, "to a committee of no more than twelve top-level experts or to such *ad hoc* advisory committees or working groups as might be necessary". Such a centre could create the setting for some sort of planned policy-making for science and technology within the system, besides providing a mechanism for coordination and harmonisation. Because it need have only a small staff, it could be flexible and could respond quickly to changing situations and in providing advice to the Secretary-General. At the same time, it would compete with no existing organisation for either resources or authority.

If set up at the present juncture, such a centre could be designed to allow for the present restructuring of the various organs involved in ECOSOC and in the central control of the UN itself. Nonetheless, it would still have to face the problem raised by the specialised agencies which still seem set against any form of coordination, let alone integration, as was also made clear at the ACAST meeting.

A message for UNCSTD

From the immediate point of view of the scientific community outside the UN, the most interesting discussions concerned the meeting to be held in Vienna in the week immediately preceding UNCSTD, 13–17 August, 1979. Known hitherto as "Forum A" (to distinguish it from "Forum B", the non-governmental event being held parallel with UNCSTD and organised by the Austrians themselves), this is now the responsibility of ACAST, and will probably be called the "ACAST Colloquium on Science, Technology and Society". It will be confined to some 200 invited scientists, technologists and other persons, including governmental representatives and those of interested organisations outside the system. Provision is being made for science writers and other journalists and possibly, if space allows, for members of the public. This is intended as a serious scientific meeting, the output of which will include a message from the world scientific community to UNCSTD, as well as proposals relevant to the conference programme of action.

Besides various papers to be prepared by the UN Office of Science and Technology, which is providing the secretariat for this meeting, there will be important inputs from four symposia being held within the context of UNCSTD between now and next summer. These include that at Tallin, on Trends and Prospects with regard to the Development of Science and Technology (4–8 December 1978); Science and Technology for Development (Singapore, March 1979) organised by a group headed by ICSU; Technology for Development (Abidjan, Ivory Coast, April 1979); and Science and Technology in Development Planning (Mexico, May 1979).

Priority among subjects discussed at the present ACAST meeting went to those on which the committee's views had been requested by José da Costa, Secretary General of next year's UN Conference on Science and Technology

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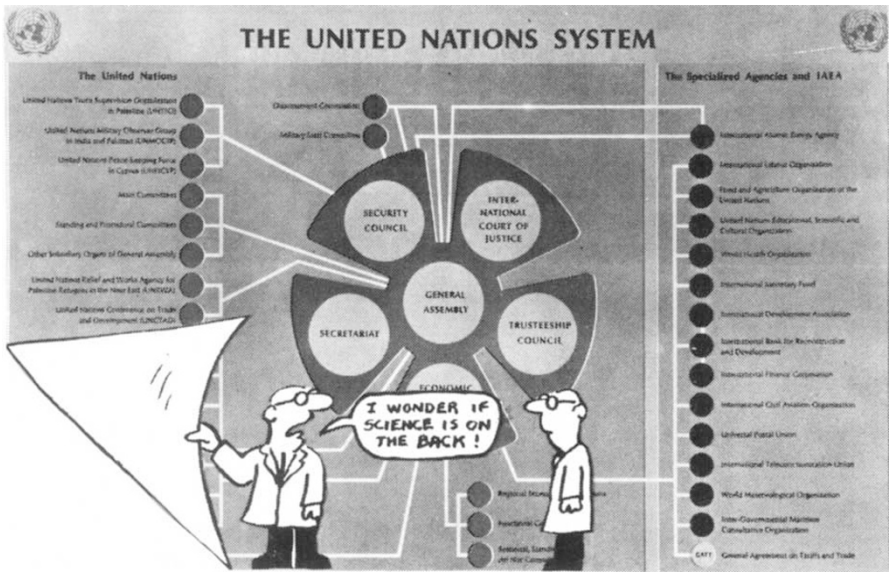

for Development (UNCSTD). Insofar as the conference itself is concerned, the most important of these was the discussion of "obstacles to the application of science and technology for development". Having as a basis a list of 31 general areas in which such obstacles might arise, ACAST pointed out that this list could be expanded to a hundred or more. It considered them by categories, each of which might be susceptible to the same type of solution at national, regional, or international level. They then fell into two broad groups: political, financial, economic and institutional obstacles to development; and those involving education and human resources, the availability and dissemination of information, and the psychological problems inherent in any society subject to the pressures inseparable from rapid development.

ACAST's suggestions stress the need for an integrated approach to specific problems that are seen as capable of reasonably early solution. Thus, to give a few examples: to improve the communication gap in a given country between its scientific and technological community, decision-makers and users, a well-mandated national advisory council might be set up, that would monitor trends and developments and interpret them to the leadership, as well as interpret political goals and objectives to the scientific and technological community. At the regional level, programmes of common interest could be identified as part of regional economic planning policy, with a regional machinery to coordinate and evaluate their performance. At a practical level, regional servicing facilities might be established, to maintain and service the special equipment of all developing countries in the region; it could maintain a spare parts bank to avoid the harrassment of delays in obtaining equipment spares. With regard to information at both regional and international levels, there should be a network of information systems not only to act as a data bank, but also to assist in collecting trends of development in technologies and to interpret their implications for developing countries.

ACAST concluded that "at the national, regional as well as international levels, the psychological obstacles can only be removed by redesigning and strengthening the education, training and information systems".

Recognising social science

Finally, ACAST briefly discussed its own future. Obviously, if something like the UN Centre for Concerted Action and Coordination on Science and Technology described above is set up, there would be a function for a small body similar to ACAST, and this is already foreseen in the suggested "committee of top-level experts". One point of which ACAST is now well aware is the need to include, in whatever body replaces it after UNCSTD and as a result of the restructuring exercise, representatives of the social sciences. The intention was never to include these when ACAST was set up in 1964, but their presence is at last seen as essential if a balanced view is to be obtained of what science and technology are doing, can and should be able to do, in the world as a whole. This much is now recognised. But whatever the decisions of the General Assembly, which has the final say in ACAST's future, it is certain that some such body must exist if the UN Secretary-General, essentially preoccupied with political affairs and the infighting of the UN system, is to be kept aware of what is happening in the science and technology on which the world increasingly and inevitably now depends. □

Racial resegregation measured

DESPITE decade-long efforts to integrate schools, increase individual welfare payments and revitalize central cities, the underlying conditions attacked by these programs remain almost unabated, according three reports delivered at last week's meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

A new study of school integration and the so-called "white flight" of middle class caucasian families to suburbs from the city centres reestablishes the seriousness of this problem, first treated in a controversial report by James Coleman in 1975. Coleman's treatment was severely criticized at the time for neglecting concurrent demographic changes and not distinguishing between forced and voluntary desegregation.

Now, David J. Armor of the Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California, has analysed integregation statistics by estimating what out-migration of whites would have taken place anyway, taking into account the different birth rates between whites and blacks, and comparing the results of court-ordered busing to voluntary methods of desegregation. He concludes that forced integration accelerates white flight by a factor of from two to four, but that voluntary integregation may not accelerate it at all.

He compares specific cases by using a "desegregation index", defined as the average percentage of white students in schools attended by minority students. (If minority students were divided among all American schools completely randomly, each school would have a desegregation index of 70 to 80. The smaller the index, the less integration.)

Armot found that, with the beginning of court-ordered integration, the index for a particular school district usually jumps. In one year, the desegregation index of Pasadena, California, rose from 37 to 53. But over the next seven years, it steadily dropped back to 35, in 1977. By comparison, nearby San Diego started its voluntary busing plan in 1968 with an index of 43. The index rose gradually to 46 and has now slipped back to 44.

During roughly the same period, a variety of programs were introduced to help raise the average income of blacks and other minorities. A report by Robert B. Hill of the National Urvan League Research Department shows that again many early gains have been eroded by the "benign neglect" policies of the Nixon and Ford Administrations and the two severe recessions of the early 1970s.

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