

## UNCSTD's Year

1979 is the year of UNCSTD, the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, which will meet in Vienna for two weeks during August. In this past year almost every nation with any interest in science and technology has compiled a national paper representing its point of view, and well over 100 documents, many running to 50 pages or more, now reside in the UNCSTD secretariat at the UN headquarters in New York. During these next few months the secretariat will have the unenviable task of distilling an immense amount of fact and opinion into some sort of agenda for Vienna. In the meantime sub-conferences in preparation for the main meeting continue unabated; in January for instance there will be meetings in Tallin in the Soviet Union and in Singapore (organised by the International Council of Scientific Unions).

Is the conference going to work out satisfactorily? What, even, do we mean by a 'satisfactory' conference? Presumably one that breaks up in fist fights or that falls apart over issues peripheral to the main themes would be deemed unsatisfactory. So too, although this view is not universally shared, would be one in which no voices were raised, no feeling engendered, no criticism voiced. Between these two poles there is much scope and it will depend largely on the leadership that the UNCSTD secretariat gives whether much of value emerges. The outcome of the labours of thousands who have contributed in one way or another to conference documents is, in the strange system in which we work, ultimately dependent on a handful of people at headquarters. In the past year such news that has filtered out has suggested quite strongly that all is not well. If relations are not all they ought to be, then this may well be excessively occupying the time of those who would be better employed in making the conference work.

But what of the papers themselves? After all the very act of compiling national papers must have put some countries through a salutary exercise of asking questions, perhaps for the first time, about the relationship between science, technology and development. We expressed the hope a year ago that this exercise would not be confined to bureaucrats but would encompass as many scientists and technologists as possible, whilst recognising that the conference is not specifically about science and technology as such. It is pleasing to be able

to note that if the preambles to papers are to be believed a widespread process of consultation, meetings and conferences has gone on in many developing countries. Developed countries, cautious about committing themselves to large new expenditures on major institutional change, have on the whole provided papers descriptive of what they can do and are prepared to do but which shy away from more general discussions of principles—some also show signs of having little involved people outside certain official circles. The British paper is a case in point; it is scrupulously accurate but the Overseas Development Ministry, which compiled it has not in any sense used the preparation of the document as an opportunity to get a national debate going.

The Vienna meeting could be an excellent opportunity for the world to evaluate very carefully just what is being and could be done in the field of science, technology and development. But for this to happen some very self-critical voices would need to be raised. Unfortunately those who attend are most likely to be representatives of government agencies and national science funding agencies with a natural concern for self-preservation. Even if the papers contain an element of self-criticism (and a few do, notably from the developing world), when it comes to the meeting itself it will take a very brave delegate to acknowledge publicly—and take the message back home—that national mechanisms for channelling science and technology into development are in need of overhaul. And yet this undoubtedly needs saying. In the developed world there is inadequate discussion about whether the level of scientific resources devoted to the developing world is appropriate and whether present organisations are making the best use of these resources. In the developing world national science bodies too often seem to get into the hands of scientists who steer the country's effort away from the immense complexities of development and towards the slightly less complex business of imitating Western science.

If the UNCSTD secretariat could make delegates ask fundamental questions about their own national efforts, that would be a real achievement. And if the organisers of the peripheral meetings in Vienna could reach out beyond official viewpoints and tap some of the more speculative feeling abroad, then the whole exercise could still be very worthwhile. □