In short, developing countries have been told to take science and technology much more seriously at a governmental level and to establish all sorts of new institutions. But the funding for it will very largely have to come from their own pockets. $250 million is not a large sum when divided amongst all potential applicants. And furthermore there is a strong feeling both in developed countries and in the poorer and smaller developing countries that when it comes to sharing out the money, the larger and relatively richer countries of the Third World will dominate the handouts, because they are more easily able to put up an impressive case, already having the right beginnings.

Role of scientists

The Programme of Action was almost entirely debated at the diplomatic level. How then did scientists and technologists fare at the conference? There had been an ambiguity about their role in UNCSTD right from the word go. Naturally it was not to be just another scientific conference. But how deeply were scientists to be drawn into participation in Vienna? It has been no secret that Joao Frank da Costa, the Secretary-General of the conference has had little enthusiasm for their involvement, and certainly issues such as transfer of technology, and institutional and funding arrangements within the United Nations system were ones on which relatively few scientists might have an informed view. On the other hand, scientists might have extremely clear views on global information networks, means of strengthening facilities in the developing world, research priorities and so on. In the event, however, the ambiguity persisted right to the end of the conference, and left many scientists disillusioned.

One reason for disappointment could have been the variability in the delegations. Some were manned almost entirely by civil servants, others carried a professor or two and a very few (such as West Germany, Austria, France and the United States) made any serious effort to be multi-dimensional by incorporating politicians, academics, industrialists and trades-unionists. There was thus a feeling amongst scientists that they did not constitute a critical mass capable of making their presence felt. This sentiment undoubtedly coloured the discussions in the working group on science, technology, development and the future. Under certain circumstances it would have been possible for this working group's report to have provided the perfect technical counterbalance to the administrative and structural Programme of Action — in effect presenting a pair of papers outlining possibilities and how they might be achieved. In practice this was not to be.

Some of the responsibility for this must undoubtedly be placed on ACAST, the UN's Advisory Committee on Science and Technology. The committee hastily put together a colloquium of 300 scientists in Vienna for the week before UNCSTD. Creditable as such an occasion may have been (and there were a majority of developing-world scientists at it), it undoubtedly siphoned much of the scientific interest away from UNCSTD. And since the working papers for it were prepared by the UN's special agencies, the colloquium already had the veneer of a UN activity before it started. Its final report merely confirmed this, being the sort of document that would be very acceptable in UN circles but which lacked a sense of novelty or character.

The UNCSTD working group started off by falling into the trap of wanting to submit a similarly dull document. But eventually a small group of scientists, clearly horrified at what they were in danger of having to put their name to, forced at least a modest revision (after the years of preparation and millions of dollars poured into UNCSTD, the group's activities were heavily curtailed by lack of time!). Ultimately the report did give a more satisfactory indication of how science and technology could contribute — with particular reference to the need to involve the young and to make positive efforts to encourage women. The role of the United States delegation was crucial — even during late-night negotiating sessions when almost every other delegation was either absent or fielding one representative, the US team would be up to ten in number.

Modest momentum

The cause of development is ultimately in the hands not of delegates to conferences but of politicians apportioning resources and of those at the cutting edge. Has enough come from UNCSTD to give them new direction, support and drive? The Chinese at UNCSTD produced a very apt proverb "don't add yet more flowers to the bouquet; send more charcoal in snowy weather". Will the conference be remembered just for verbal bouquets, or are developed countries prepared to send more tangible help? The level of financial support over the next two years leaves the question open, although the establishment of the funding facility itself must be regarded as a modest step forward in international collaboration. But much depends on just how effectively developing countries put together their proposals in the coming months. It would be easy to spend the money on large capital-intensive projects — grandiose new universities and research laboratories lavishly equipped with equipment but short on running expenses and staff, particularly at the technician level. By 1981 such demands could already have given a bloated and inappropriate image to the whole project. It is better that developing countries (and particularly the poorer developing countries) take the opportunity slowly and thoughtfully to lay down the foundations of a real science and technology policy. Much of the money would be better spent on encouraging communication and discussion than in bricks and mortar.

The outcome of UNCSTD has never been seriously in doubt — the Group of 77 have had to sacrifice their rosier dreams, developed countries have had to make some relatively minor concessions. What matters now is that the modest amount of momentum acquired is not squandered in the years ahead.

A slightly bolder approach

As long as *Nature* has existed, letters reporting important scientific advances have formed the backbone of the journal. The length of these communications has grown steadily with the years as scientists have felt under greater pressure to give sufficient detail to allow a critical evaluation, but their style has remained remarkably unchanged.

We are often asked why we do not fall into line with almost every other journal and publish an abstract with each letter — and our answer has been that we have tried to preserve in the letters section the sort of directness that people achieve when writing to each other. But we go on to add that there is nothing to prevent anyone writing a first paragraph that encapsulates the whole story — background, summary of the work done, consequences; something more valuable than an abstract because it gives context.

For the past few years we have gradually been trying to persuade authors to improve their first paragraphs, if necessary with some help from our sub-editors. Now we take the experiment a bit further. From this week's issue, the first paragraph of each letter will be printed in a bolder face. We hope this may provide some little help to those very many of our readers who turn to *Nature* to keep in touch with a wider range of science than their own specialisation. We hope too that our authors will be encouraged to put even more thought into getting the first paragraph right. And the writer of this leader might practise what he preaches. □