



15 November 1979

Last chance for UNCSTD?

THERE have been two main reactions to the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, which took place in Vienna in August. Some delegations returned home convinced that the conference had been a success; they support this claim by emphasising the amount of common ground established between developed and developing countries, and the general agreement on directions for future cooperation. Others, perhaps greater in number, returned feeling the conference had been a failure — but a qualified one. It had not resulted in any major shift in research towards Third World needs, or any particular clarification of what these needs are — but a framework had been agreed for pursuing both of these objectives.

Which of these two interpretations eventually prevails will depend on the outcome of the debates scheduled to take place next week at the UN General Assembly in New York. The Assembly's second committee will be discussing both the results of the Vienna conference, and the specific ways in which actions agreed by the conference should be carried out. Unfortunately many points of contention still remain, and it would be a tragedy if the short-term perspective engendered by the economic problems of the developed countries, as well as continued in-fighting within the UN system over future roles and responsibilities, placed in jeopardy the fragile achievements of Vienna.

There has already been some progress since the conference ended. The Director General for Development and International Economic Cooperation has prepared a detailed outline for the new intergovernmental committee (IGC) to oversee 'science, technology and development' issues. The Advisory Committee on the Application of Science and Technology to Development (ACAST), which despite recent criticism has considerable past achievement to its name, will be absorbed into a new body to advise the IGC. And the United Nations Development Programme, charged with administering the interim fund which the conference agreed should be set up on voluntary contributions totalling at least \$250 million for 1980 and 1981, has produced a business-like prospectus outlining how it will carry out this role.

But it would be wrong to think that next week's meeting will be anything like plain sailing. There are several controversial issues still to be decided, in particular the division of responsibilities within the UN structure for science and technology activities, and levels of appointment and staffing to service the new committee.

The Group of 77, which has been negotiating for the developing countries, is expected to present its proposals to the second committee outlining its views on these matters. And given their importance to both developed and developing countries — the Vienna conference, for example, was unable to agree on the specific role which the IGC should play with respect to the interim fund — heated discussion seems inevitable.

In terms of extra financial transfers, the situation looks even bleaker than it did in Vienna. Britain has just announced new foreign aid cuts which make it even more unlikely that it will be prepared to contribute to the interim fund when a pledging conference is held next February. The French position on an apparent commitment to increased UNDP contributions remains ambiguous. And Canada is reported to be having second thoughts about its proposal to shift funds within its aid budget to support joint research projects between Canadian and Third World research workers: Canada's International Development Research Centre, which had been expected to receive some of the new funds, is having its expansion plans closely scrutinised.

Perhaps the most alarming news comes from the United States, where the new Institute for Scientific and Technical Cooperation proposed by President Carter and offered as a centrepiece of the US presentation at Vienna is in serious difficulties in Congress. The Senate has refused to provide any funds for the institute's operation. Despite pressure from the House of Representatives, legislators seem determined to turn the ISTC into a sacrificial lamb on the altar of reduced public spending and federal bureaucracy. And its fortunes do not augur well for Congressional response to the \$25 million request which President Carter is expected to make in January for the UNDP interim fund — already the source of considerable controversy in the State Department — over where the money is to come from.

Yet if there was one message to come through from UNCSTD, it was that helping to promote scientific and technological activities in the Third World is not a question of handing our blank welfare cheques — it is an essential prerequisite for a flourishing global economy.

The tighter the purse strings, the more difficult this will be to achieve. And ironically the more important it becomes to ensure that international mechanisms such as the UNDP and the new IGC can be made to work fairly and effectively. □