Canada prepares for UNCSTD

J. King Gordon

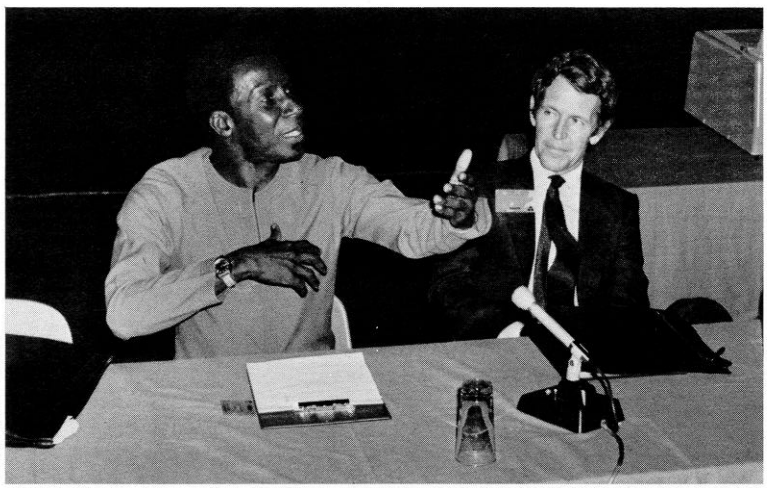

Photo: Neill McKee

The Hon Rex Nettleford (left) outlines IDRC's philosophy as William Jenkins, CIDA's Vice President (Policy), listens.

Any major UN conference stirs up a certain amount of excitement among those most immediately involved. This is certainly true for the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) that takes place in Vienna this August. Some of this interest is deliberately stimulated by the conference planners to enhance the significance of the conference, and to ensure its continuing impact on the global scene. Governments have consulted national scientists and technologists, industry and industrial research centres, and universities for guidance in the preparation of their national papers. And the scientific community has been encouraged to sponsor seminars that will explore some of the major themes to be discussed at UNCSTD, and give advice to the governments on the responsible stand they should assume in the UN forum.

It seemed fitting that such a seminar or symposium should be held in Canada, in May, and that its sponsor should be IDRC in association with the Royal Society of Canada, SCITEC, and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). And what better venue than the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto under the direction of that very distinguished international scientist, Tuzo Wilson, who with IDRC President, Ivan Head, opened the symposium.

They came to Toronto from all ten provinces of Canada — scientists and technologists, development economists and administrators, and a few government policymakers. And they came from the five continents as well — spokesmen for the people of the Third World and representatives of international organizations. It was these latter who introduced a measure of realism into the context within which the discussions took place and brought the debate down from the esoteric levels of science policy to the basic needs of the desperately poor. They also helped to dilute that self-confident superiority that occasionally marks Canadian technocrats anxious to embark on a mission to help the underprivileged in the lands far across the sea.

What was evident from the very start was that the traditional concept of the transfer of science and technology had become outmoded. In the first decades after the war, because the great reservoir of development power was concentrated in the industrialized world, it was believed that all that was necessary was to install and set in motion transmission belts that would carry technological resources to the primitive lands to provide their inhabitants with the means to lead a civilized and affluent life — like us. Behind this was a charitable urge to help the poor and a sublime faith in technocracy as a panacea for human poverty and suffering. It took some time for the dawning of a realization that such an approach contained large elements of colonialism, resulted in the perpetuation of an economic and cultural dependency, tended to serve the interests of an elite in developing countries, and, for the majority of the poor, just didn't work.

Jorge Sabato of the Bariloche Foundation in Argentina pointed out that the transfer and application of science and technology was a much more complicated process: it had to take into account not only economic and industrial objectives but the broad social, cultural, normative, and even spiritual goals of the society determined to create a better life for its people. Science and technology could not be separated from national policy, just as national development policy had to perceive science and technology as relevant components. He also stressed that the ill-balanced relationship between North and South made dialogue and cooperation difficult, but negotiation necessary. And he affirmed that an essential element in any cooperative relationship was the building up of a scientific and technological capability in a developing country.

There were obstacles to the achievement of such a goal. These were outlined by Anton Zahlen of the Advisory Committee on the Application of Science and Technology to Development (ACAST) as falling into four principal categories: those inherent in the coun-

try itself; those inherent in the technology itself; external obstacles based on the superior power of advanced countries, the costs of technology, and the paramount position of transnational enterprises; and obstacles in the interface between North and South having to do with human relations, language, financing, laws, etc. None of these was insuperable but the approach to them had to be seen as part of the negotiating process and ultimately of cooperation.

Vadakan Vinyu, Director of the UN Asian and Pacific Development Institute in Bangkok completed the assessment of the contemporary international scene with a reminder that technology cannot be considered culturally neutral, and made a strong plea for the development of indigenous science and technology adapted to the resources and to the cultural as well as the socio-political needs of the Third World country.

Against this world background the symposium turned its attention to the Canadian experience and the Canadian resources for science and technology in development. William Jenkins, Vice-President, Policy, of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), spoke about Canada's international assistance program, directed to strengthening the self-reliance of the recipient countries. He admitted that it was possible that CIDA's program was too project-oriented; that the projects might be too much identified with a CIDA program; and that the effectiveness of any international assistance program was dependent on the project director or advisor. He indicated the extent to which CIDA drew on Canadian universities for expertise to man their projects. For the future, one should seek ways to match the needs of developing countries with Canadian capabilities.

The choice of Rex Nettleford as the spokesman for IDRC told something about the nature of the organization before he uttered a word. Nettleford is Jamaican, Director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of the West Indies, choreographer and leading dancer in the Jamaican National Dance Theatre, and Member of the Board of Governors of IDRC. Nettleford spoke of the revolutionary approach of the IDRC with its central aim to assist in building up research capabilities of the Third World and its policies determined by an international board of governors whose Third World members were intent to bring the principle of interdependence into the pattern of relationships between the so-called developed world and the so-called developing world. This meant a change in relationship from subordination and superordination to sharing and partnership, to a free flow of ideas, to the forging of new institutional arrangements based on partnership. And here, said Nettleford, is where the universities become important. He invited Canadian universities to take the initiative and establish organic links with sister universities in the Third World who could benefit from the contact. "That is the spirit which is present in IDRC," said Nettleford, "and IDRC is committed to facilitating that kind of partnership wherever the initiative comes from."

One purpose of the symposium was to brief the Government of Canada, which was in the process of preparing a position paper for the Vienna Conference on the opinions of the Canadian scientific community. A Canadian paper had been prepared, giving a historical account of the evolution of a science policy in Canada and Canada's participation in the international effort to apply science and technology for development. A second paper had been prepared by a committee of the Royal Society and SCITEC on the reactions of the scientific, technical and social science community to UNCSTD.

These papers, in addition to the contribution of speakers and discussants at the symposium, provided the basic substance for the three working groups discussing Canada's present and potential future international role in science and technology.

The first group representing governments and NGOs chewed over the contributions of Jenkins and Nettleford and seemed to agree that the IDRC "model" more realistically fitted into the new pattern of international cooperation for development. It showed some concern about the delay in the preparation of Canadian science and development policy for UNCSTD.

The second group — industries and industrial research institutes — surprisingly, appeared to be fairly complacent about the role of the transnationals in the transfer of science and technology for development to which a great deal of attention was devoted in two United Nations papers prepared by the UNCSTD Preparatory Committee and ACAST.

The third group, in which Canadian as well as Third World universities and institutes were well represented, appeared to make the most significant progress. They had the advantage of two very important contributions: from Richard Griffiths, Director of the British Inter-University Council (IUC) and from A.J. van Dulst, Director of the Netherlands University Foundation for International Cooperation (NUFFIC). Each described inter-university mechanisms for linking teaching, training, and research activities in British and Dutch universities with universities in developing countries. The emphasis was not so much on the enhancing of developed country research that might have relevance to Third World needs, but rather the extension of traditional academic collaboration to include scholars in developing countries whose institutions were playing an increasingly important role in their country's development policies. There were strong expressions of opinion that previous Canadian mechanisms were inadequate and that satisfactory procedures for involving Canadian scholars and researchers, having regard to effective and continuing links, were mainly lacking. Considerable hope was expressed that the new AUCC International Development Office under the direction of Michael Oliver might be given the necessary support from both universities and government funding agencies to play a similar role to IUC and NUFFIC.

Two presentations on the final morning of the symposium had an important impact on the working groups and their deliberations: a description of the orientation and activities of the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC) by G. Richerts, Scientific Counsellor of the Swedish Embassy in Ottawa, and Princeton Lyman's account of the new Institute for Scientific and Technical Cooperation of the United States government. Both stressed their role in enabling the scientific and technological community of their countries to collaborate with Third World institutions in strengthening research capabilities. And both suggested that it was along these lines that their governments would indicate increased support of the UNCSTD objectives.

In endorsing such a position, members of the working group on the involvement of universities and institutes felt strongly that here was a positive initiative which might be taken by the Canadian delegation to Vienna.

A symposium, quite apart from its formal program, provides a meeting place for like-minded searchers after truth, for exchanges of views, for the opening up of new doors and windows. The person-to-person relationship in the symposium kept all participants close to the central object of the whole big UNCSTD enterprise in which Canada must play a significant part. That central object is the condition of man, the dignity of man, the creative potential of man. And this was what that great Canadian scientist, Omond Solandt, was really saying when he spoke at the dinner and reminded his colleagues that the quality of life as a goal of science and technology was what counted. □

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