The main building in the Mont Sainte Marie resort is set on the bottom of a cup of green hills in the province of Quebec in Canada. If you are looking for a view or wish to locate yourself on the map of the Gatineau Hills, you will have to climb a little mountain or at least follow the winding path that takes you down toward the lake. One trouble with the Bellagio conference held there in May 1982 was that there was no time to do either.

The conference was called to examine the financing of education for development in Third World countries. The majority of participants were senior staff members of so-called "donor agencies." One conclusion that emerged after two-and-a-half days' talk was how impossible it was to tackle such an issue without taking into account the drastic changes that had occurred in the global system.

The group that met this year traces its origins to a similar inter-agency group that gathered from time to time at an ancient castle set in the mountainous lake country of northern Italy known as Bellagio. The Rockefeller Foundation had converted it into an exclusive, but functional, conference and study centre. Researchers and consultants from the School of Education of Stanford University, the Faculty of Education and the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex, as well as from IDRC and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), had been asked to prepare papers under such titles as "World trends and prospects for educational costs and expenditures", "The political economy of financing education in developing countries", "Adjusting to the 1980s — taking stock of educational expenditure", and "A review of educational innovations to reduce costs". Powerful academic erudition, which at times left the uninitiated — and even the practical program director of an international agency — in a mild state of shock! But there were many realistic analyses, which sometimes contributed more than was intended — a persistent assumption that education was the "handmaiden" of the West's great contribution to the developing countries in the shape of modern science and technology, the close tie between education and increased income, the tendency of educational development to concentrate in the urban sector to the neglect of the rural, the status significance of education, the concern of donor agencies that their support of education be cost effective in terms of economic development.

This was one side of the picture. The other side was revealed in an IDRC research paper on educational innovation as a factor in cost reduction. Certain innovations, such as the use of radio and video communication systems to reach a larger learning constituency saved on the costs of buildings and teachers. The innovations, in general, could also stand on their own as representative of new and relevant ideas emerging from a fresh assessment by the authorities in a developing country of the educational needs of their people. And notable, in case after case, a shift in emphasis from the
inspired and beneficent wisdom of the donor to the basic realism of the country and the people of the country who are primarily responsible for achieving a measure of good life for their people. Conference participants were issued with a reminder of where the real responsibility rested by the authors of one paper, who produced the interesting statistic that contributions from all outside sources accounted for only nine percent of the total funding of education in countries of the Third World.

One important change in educational emphasis that became increasingly evident in the later 1970s was a new recognition of the claims of the formerly neglected rural sector. The achievement of a measure of economic growth in the urban industrial areas, fed to some extent by an infusion of western technology and capital investment, did little if anything to alleviate the dire poverty of the people on the farms and in the villages. Education tended to be focused on the population of the cities as an adjunct to economic advancement. The decision to adopt a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities was much more than a conversion to a more enlightened approach to the claims of human rights. There were political and economic factors as well — a mounting resentment against a power structure that served the interests of one class to the neglect of others, and an increasing recognition that the urgent need for increased food production meant new concern for the agricultural community and its productivity in the production of food.

This movement of educational focus from town to country was reported in the papers before the conference, but was also evident in the firsthand information from national and international agencies providing support for new initiatives in developing countries. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported new demands for support for literacy programs and for the development of primary education. The International Labour Organization (ILO) appeared to be moving away from the large vocational training schools linked closely to industrial development to self-teaching instruction modules and on-the-job training with a heavy emphasis on rural occupations. The World Health Organization (WHO) was placing a new emphasis on meeting the training needs of rapidly advancing primary health care programs with a focus on improvement of conditions of sanitation, fresh water, food production, and nutrition at the village level. Closely associated with such developments is a concern for various manifestations of non-formal and adult education, not as an alternative to formal education, but as an essential complementary educational activity.

If it were true that the main responsibility for educational development in the Third World rests with the governments and educational authorities in developing countries, then it would seem to follow that one of the main contributions of donor agencies must be to strengthen the capability of those governments and authorities to direct that development in the most effective way to meet the needs of their people. Here, perhaps, IDRC sets an example in its support of research in and by developing countries so as to help in building up their scientific and technological capacity. Its more recent emphasis on training programs closely linked to research projects as well as its encouragement of cooperative research between Canadian and Third World universities and research institutions is a natural progression. In the development program under the Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation (NUFFIC), educational support is moving out from specialized scientific institutes in the Netherlands into project and program cooperation in Third World countries. In Sweden, The Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC) is following IDRC's example with emphasis on cooperation with international agencies.

At the Mont-Sainte Marie conference were a number of delegates from Third World countries. Some were invited in their own right as distinguished educators. But interestingly enough, the voice of the Third World was heard more often in the presentations and interventions of the representatives of international agencies — the World Bank, UNICEF, the Inter-American Bank — institutions normally considered as expressing the developed-country point of view. It was they who insisted with greatest force that the traditional donor-recipient relationship, frequently linked with a resultant Third World dependency, was now outdated. Support from developed countries and from international institutions was needed more than ever. But it had to be on the basis of cooperation among equals. There had been a great deal of evidence that this transformation was taking place. While the well-documented tradition of the political goals of aid was still demonstrated in ongoing policy, there were other examples of belief in the mutual goals of cooperation as set forth in the Brandt Report. In the field of educational support, the cooperative initiatives of nongovernmental organizations in a wide range of activities were highly important. And universities in developed and developing countries were demonstrating in a more effective way their time-honoured role as a community of scholars with little regard for national boundaries. The British and the Dutch have been pioneers in this inter-university linkage. Now Canadian universities, through their International Development Office and with support from CIDA's Institutional Cooperation and Development Services Division and IDRC's Cooperative Programs Unit are becoming an important part of this new mode of international cooperation in education.

The international situation has changed: The role of national and international agencies has changed since the Bellagio Group came into existence more than a decade ago. In the final hours of the conference the question was raised: Should it continue? It had been a useful experience for all - and not just in the formal discussions. Perhaps what was needed was a careful assessment — not merely of the question of keeping the group in existence, but of the more basic question of what constructive new directions might be set. An ad hoc committee was chosen to give these matters serious thought.

It is possible that they may have an opportunity to climb a little mountain to get a view of the global landscape and follow the winding path down to the valley where the people live.

J. King Gordon, former IDRC Special Advisor to the President, University Relations, was a conference consultant, education for development, for the Canadian International Development Agency. The proceedings of the conference will be published by IDRC later this year.