Close to 250 people, for the most part Quebec university professors and researchers, took part in a Conference on Research for International Development held at the University of Quebec at Trois Rivières, April 29 and 30, 1982.

The conference was organized jointly by the University of Quebec, the University of Quebec at Trois Rivières and IDRC. It aimed to identify Quebec’s potential for research that could be carried out in cooperation with Third World institutions, and to provide the Quebec scientific community with information on IDRC’s experience in research assistance in the Third World, particularly in areas of interest to Quebec.

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"A mong the many factors that make it possible for a society to provide for the welfare of its members and to improve their standard of living, the ability to define and solve problems is of prime importance," said Mr. Ivan L. Head, IDRC president, at the beginning of the conference. "This ability is the ‘capacity for research.’"

This capacity for research and invention, long established in industrialized countries, appeared later in developing countries. Just how much later was first brought to world attention in 1963, during the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development in the interest of less-developed countries.

In 1969, the World Bank’s Commission on International Development, headed by Lester B. Pearson, again considered the problem. The Pearson Commission estimated that, at maximum, only three percent of the world’s scientific and technical research was being conducted in developing countries.

Quebec is also relatively new to the field of research and development: Its experience dates back no more than 20 years. At that time, Quebec very quickly moved from essentially rural economy to a post-industrial one. This rapid change in socioeconomic structure of its society had numerous consequences. One of the most important was the radical transformation of the educational system at the beginning of the 1960s: a vast network of primary and secondary schools, then colleges, and finally new universities sprouted throughout the province. Research and development activity began in earnest once this infrastructure was in place.

Quebec’s budding experience in research and development is rooted in a history that is to a large degree similar to many developing countries: one that saw a rapid transition from a rural to an industrial society; headlong expansion of the educational system; an economy based on a network of small- and medium-sized industries; and the need to concentrate development efforts and provide coordination.

According to Mr. Yvan Cliche, president of the executive committee and general director of the Fonds de formation de chercheurs et d’action concertée (researcher training and concerted action fund), "It is possible that the speed with which change took place in Quebec stimulated our creativity; at the very least, it tested our ability to resist change and put us in touch with the world. Because of this, Quebec can probably understand better than others the anxiety of countries faced with a similar transition in just as short a time."

One source of anxiety is technology transfer. Mr. Rogerio Cerqueira Leite, formerly vice-rector of Brazil’s Campinas University and currently a professor there, startled the conference participants somewhat when he asserted: "If one percent of the promises contained in the countless international agreements and accords signed between the governments of industrialized countries and their counterparts in less-developed countries, if one percent of these promises had been kept, underdevelopment would already have been eliminated. This is not due solely to the conformism of less-developed countries, if at one time was expressed.

The question remains unanswered. But at least a real effort was made during the two days on the part of Quebec researchers to promote the exchange and sharing of expertise and experience.

The University of Quebec at Trois Rivières embodies this idea. Its Pulp and Paper Research Centre is already helping to set up small, autonomous paper mills in India and China. And in each of the conference’s nine workshops, views were exchanged regarding challenges and objectives in agriculture, health care, new energy sources, forestry, research planning, population and development, education, information, and collaboration among researchers.

If the support Quebec has given to solidarity with the Third World in recent years is any indication of the future, this meeting will no doubt lead to new action and cooperation. The receptiveness that reigned throughout both days was expressed by one of the participants, who said to a colleague during a break: "I think we could learn an awful lot from researchers in Third World countries."

The papers presented at the Quebec symposium and a summary of discussion will soon be published by the University of Quebec Press, Quebec, Canada.