

FEATURE

*A monthly features service on
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to development.*

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UNCSTD: PREPARATIONS ARE WELL UNDERWAY

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The stage is set. Ten thousand years after the invention of agriculture, two hundred years after the start of the industrial revolution, a new technological revolution is gaining impetus.

Based largely on the integration of modern tele-communications and computers, the "telematics" revolution as it is called, will free man's imagination just as the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century liberated man's productive power. Unfortunately, it also could further the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

One wonders what mankind can expect from the new telematics revolution. In order to facilitate access for developing countries to science and technology, the driving force of economic and social progress, the United Nations General Assembly in December 1976 called for an international conference on science and technology for development. UNCSTD as it has become known, will be held next August in Vienna. The imminence of this new technological revolution simply serves to underline the conference's importance.

The planners of UNCSTD wanted it to be different from previous United Nations conferences. Instead of soliciting experts, they chose to invite political leaders, in particular those involved in the conception and implementation of science and technology policies. By bringing together those who make daily decisions on the kind of industrial development their country will follow, the organizers of the conference think it more likely that recommendations from the conference can be implemented. Instead of asking a committee of experts to prepare the working documents, the Secretary General of the Conference, Mr Joao Da Costa, decided that

the ideas should come from the base. Consequently he invited each country to submit a national paper stating how science and technology could be made to serve development, suggesting new forms of cooperation, and advising on new ways of better utilizing the United Nations system and other international organizations.

The preliminary draft program of action for the conference identifies three main target areas for helping to bring science and technology to bear on development. The first, strengthening the scientific and technological capacities of developing countries, includes topics such as science and technology planning and policy, infrastructures, research and development networks, the development of human resources, and technology assessment and transfer as well as the exchange of information and experience.

The second target is the restructuring of the conditions for access to scientific know-how and technology. This topic recognizes that the present pattern of international relations is imperfect and reflects gross disparities among nations. The recommendations made in the draft program of action deal with the developing countries' access to information, the role of the transnational corporations, and international information systems.

Finally, the last target encompasses the improved coordination of scientific and technological activities within the UN system and an increase in financial resources for those activities. The UN system should, says the draft, formulate an overall science and technology policy in line with the development strategies required by the establishment of the New International Economic Order.

The leading scientists, engineers and technicians all over the world have started to think about their potential role in the setting up of a new international (research, science and technology) order. During a meeting held in Singapore at the end of January, delegates from 19 of the most important associations of scientists in the world acknowledged that the problems of international development have not been of much concern to a large proportion of the scientific community. The Singapore Declaration admits that half of the working scientists -- who represent 90 percent of all the scientists who ever lived -- are involved in the arms race. Essentially the text of the Declaration is the recognition of the responsibilities of scientists toward the 800 million deprived of the Earth, literally left aside by technological progress.

The Singapore meeting proposed a massive development of technology institutes in the Third World to train high quality technicians, to which it invited scientists and technicians of the world to contribute. It specifically stressed the need "for some of the developed countries to create and fund national, but internationally oriented bodies to undertake research on the whole spectrum of development problems". Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) was specifically cited as a prototype of the agencies that will be required to strengthen the scientific capacity and technological autonomy of the developing countries.

There was a consensus on the importance of providing means by which an aptitude for science and engineering could be inculcated and nurtured in young people in the developing world, and on how awareness of scientific promises and national needs could be cultivated. The assembly suggested that transnational corporations should be encouraged to introduce apprenticeship schemes in modern technology in countries where they operate.

Already some of these recommendations are being applied. The United States has announced that it would create an organism similar to IDRC, and Sweden has an agency already patterned along the same lines. Before August 1979, both in the industrialized north and the developing south, universities, industry and governments will become engaged in the search for a more humane, productive, use for their skills.

As the preparations enter their final phase, Mr Joao Da Costa has suggested that the national and regional meetings that have preceded the conference would be as important as the Vienna conference itself in many ways. And indeed, there are signs that the UNCSTD preparations have fostered a better understanding between potential adversaries, and encouraged the international scientific community to assume a more active interest in the problems of development.

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