

nature

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## UNCSTD: a survival exercise for the developed world?

THE countdown to the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) in August 1979 calls for national papers to be submitted to the secretariat by 1 May this year in first draft, by 1 August in final draft. Needless to say this first deadline has been missed by many nations, but there is a widespread flurry of activity at present, as papers begin to emerge or at least to be circulated internally for discussion. Some developed nations have entered into this exercise with enthusiasm—the Swedes and the Canadians are likely to bring to UNCSTD the same vigour they bring to many international meetings, particularly as both nations, free of ex-colonial attachments, have developed special institutions aimed at experimenting in development assistance (Wendy Barnaby reports on Swedish preparations on page 328). But for most of the developed world UNCSTD is no more than something that has to be lived with and survived intact, so national papers are likely to be relatively bland and non-committal. This will contrast with papers from many developing countries in which radical and unambiguous viewpoints are going to be expressed.

The British national paper will, it is widely expected, be in the cautious mould adopted by most developed countries. It is likely to describe quite carefully the way Britain runs its science, the way British assistance for developing countries is channelled, the sort of general priorities that are assigned to different aspects of aid. It will, no doubt, point out that the aid programme for the next three years is scheduled to grow by 6% per year from its present level of around £700 million net annually. The sentiments expressed on the need for adequate technical manpower within the developing world will doubtless be totally unexceptionable.

One issue which will be carefully avoided, however, is that of industrial development. There can be general agreement that science and technology should contribute to health, agriculture and exploitation of natural resources, and few in the developed world would stand in the way of that sort of aid. But what about encouraging local industry to expand and provide some of the products which traditionally Britain has supplied? Here we run into deeper political waters because one country's development may mean another's unemployment. So is the developing world simply to remain the supplier of raw materials? It would have been good if the Ministry of Overseas Development had been able to grasp that nettle more firmly. But instead there will be an air of 'damage-limitation' about the whole report. From the British government's point of view there

is, alas, nothing to be gained and a lot to be lost by floating new ideas in a document like this. At UNCSTD anything that is regarded as preaching will be met with hostility; anything that suggests new commitments will be met with calls for immediate implementation.

Not so shackled are the non-governmental organisations—indeed several forthcoming conferences by scientists themselves on development are likely to be quite lively affairs. And numerous national academies of science are expected to contribute discussion papers to the UNCSTD secretariat alongside the official national papers. The Royal Society is one such, and although its paper has been put together in an indecent haste (it is less than two months since its working party first met) there is a good chance that the report will venture into territory which the national paper could only touch on rather lightly—the quality of technical staff.

There were some raised eyebrows when the working party—average age 66—was announced. Wouldn't it all look a little too senior? But this very seniority has allowed the group to report, from lifetimes of experience, on the difficulties of transplanting ideas and technology when the ground into which they are being transferred lacks middle levels of expertise who will actually have to cope on a day-to-day basis. Preaching? Maybe, but the chairman, Sir Ieuan Maddock, would say much the same thing about trends in the developed world—that there are a diminishing number of people prepared to make, do, operate and repair, and this bodes ill for manufacturing industry. The remedy cannot be universal; it must be specific and depend on whether developing countries want to go it alone or take advantage of bi- or multilateral aid. But it is bound to need higher standards of technical training, a loosening of the idea that a university degree is the only qualification worth having (and immediately excuses the holder from any dirty work) and the strengthening of ancillary services such as libraries and information departments.

The Royal Society's contemplative paper is likely to be in contrast to that from the US National Academy of Sciences. At last count, the academy was proposing 22 areas of initiative in food, health, resources, urban and industrial problems, in which the theme of expansion recurred with monotonous regularity. With the best will in the world one is left wondering whether the expansion would go beyond that of job opportunities in the US. The proposals sound too much like plans for a crusade against underdevelopment, and may well attract little support outside the United States. □