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Science and Man in the Americas

The international meeting arranged by Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia (CONACYT) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and held in Mexico City 20 June through 4 July was successful beyond the organizers' expectations. The average quality of the sessions surpassed those of a typical meeting in the United States. Audiences were attentive and appreciative. Questions were numerous, discussion was spirited. Success of the venture led to numerous suggestions that subsequent, similar hemispheric meetings should be arranged.

The majority of the credit for the happy outcome should go to the Mexicans. As hosts, they were responsible for the innumerable logistic arrangements that must be made on such an occasion. In addition, they shared in formulating the intellectual content of the meeting. The tasks of the CONACYT group were eased by the participation of President Luis Echeverría as honorary cochairman of the meeting.

As the title for the meeting suggested, the content of the sessions related to urgent human needs. Thus most of the presentations dealt with technology or with research directed toward applications. The organizers selected major themes of particular interest to Latin Americans and areas in which they are active.

Some of the sessions involved a mutually useful interchange of scientific information. Other symposia, such as that on transfer of technology, were more controversial. Such sessions underlined the existence of deep differences in the viewpoints of the participants. Nevertheless, the discourse was civil and, while few opinions were reversed, the principals departed with a clearer concept of each other's position.

An airing of grievances, while sometimes a prelude to accommodation, is not as dependable a basis for a continuing collaborative effort as is knowledge shared to mutual advantage. At any rate, this auditor felt that enthusiasm on the part of the participants and the audience was most manifest at sessions devoted to energy, food, and resources.

A symposium on deserts and arid lands evoked much interest. These terrains constitute about one-third of the earth's continental areas, and their intelligent management is an interesting challenge that has had comparatively minimal attention. It is now clear that both man and nature can be much better served through practices based on scientific knowledge, and the carrying capacity for animals can be increased without deleterious effects.

At another symposium, devoted to food and nutrition, a Brazilian scientist told of research in his country that is leading to much better practices in the distribution of fruit. Previously about two-thirds of the harvest was lost. A series of studies on controlled environments for storage has been outstandingly successful. At another session, improved methods for food processing were described. These are leading toward minimizing waste and attendant pollution, while making available nutritious materials that previously had been lost.

Enlightened leaders in Latin America are coming to realize that the destinies of their lands are tied to wise utilization of technology. Essential to this objective is a vigorous scientific establishment. In earlier years, scientists received little encouragement or support; that situation seems to be changing.

Scientific cooperation of the United States with Latin America is likely to take many forms—for example, through the National Academy of Sciences, the Organization of American States, and the Agency for International Development. In this effort, AAAS can have a most useful role. The recent meeting in Mexico City may well prove to be an historic moment in a changing relationship.—PHILIP H. ABELSON