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U.N. Energy Conference: Substance and Politics

The U.N. Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy held in Nairobi this past August was, from a substantive point of view, perhaps the most successful of the recent series of U.N. conferences on global issues. Reports from the series of technical panels and crosscutting issues groups generally ranged from good to excellent. A synthesis report put the various recommendations into a single document. The earlier drafts of the Programme of Action had incorporated most of this accumulated wisdom, often in conflicting paragraphs supported by individual nations or by one of two major groupings of nations: the Group of 77, representing the less-developed countries and led by Venezuela, and the EC-10, or the European Community, led by the United Kingdom. Delegates spent most of their time balancing the various approaches represented by the alternative wording; the result was a solid document providing guidelines for research and projects on the following energy sources: hydropower, fuel wood and charcoal, biomass, solar, geothermal, wind, oil shale and tar sands, ocean, draft animal power, and peat. The delegates' attention to detail at the microlevel meant that they were quite responsive to the recommendations by representatives of nongovernmental organizations for further clauses relating energy to environment, fuel wood, or the special needs and roles of women.

By many in the U.N. Secretariat, however, the conference was not considered a success. Previous global conferences have set up implementing institutions or funds for carrying out recommendations of the conference. This conference did neither. The United States stood firm, and virtually alone, against committing any new moneys to a multilateral fund, preferring bilateral aid and private investment. The debate on whether to set up a new institution was more diffuse; many delegates questioned any energy unit that would not include fossil fuels and nuclear power. The Programme of Action essentially ducked these difficult political issues by creating an interim intergovernmental committee to debate the issues further and report to the U.N. General Assembly in 1982.

Such a deferment of the politics of the conference to the General Assembly may indeed set a new model for the conferences on global issues by recognizing the limits of the special meetings. Most previous conferences have submerged the substantive issues under layers of rhetoric inapplicable to the topic at hand and inappropriate for the powers of the conference itself.

Perhaps the accommodating spirit of the energy conference was due to a new realism in the world community, one that accepts resource limitation, both material and monetary. Credit must also go to Enrique Iglesias, secretary-general of the conference, who encouraged the widest possible substantive debates both within the conference itself and at the parallel Non-Governmental Organization Forum. Many issues reflected basic development strategies and will require further research and evaluations. For example, if priority is given to making the traditional sectors self-sufficient, does that condemn these sections of a country to remain permanent "energy ghettos"? Are improved woodstoves not a way of ingraining second-class existence for the poorest? What is the long-term sustainable mix of energy sources that will allow for the development of modern industry and transportation networks yet still provide a modicum of improved quality of life for the poor?

The seriousness with which such issues were debated is a credit to the international community. The international donor community and national governments should respond to this energy Programme of Action with the funds and technical assistance with which to carry it out.—IRENE TINKER, Director, Equity Policy Center, 1302 Eighteenth Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036