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BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE: Area Code 202. Membership and Subscriptions: 467-4417.

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U.N. Conference on New and Renewable Energy

The United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy, to be held 10 to 21 August in Nairobi, offers an opportunity for global cooperation in confronting energy problems. Its scope is a product of U.N. politics: petroleum, nuclear power, and conservation were considered too hot to handle by one or another political group. Thus the conference will focus on the full range of renewable energy sources, together with geothermal energy, shale oil, and tar sands. This scope, if not logical, has its advantages: these sources are not yet so encrusted by political and economic interests as to render cooperative international discussion impossible. Moreover, the Secretary-General of the conference, Enrique Iglesias (head of the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America), has stressed the need to view renewables within broader energy and development contexts, in which conventional sources and conservation also have their proper roles.

Background technical preparations are now complete. International expert groups have reported on the status and prospects of each major technology, while other groups have analyzed such cross-cutting issues as technology transfer, R & D, education and training, and finance. Although the work of these groups was uneven, the results have been synthesized into general reports that provide a sound basis for conference deliberations. The preparatory process has so far been remarkably free of the usual U.N. polemics. While this holiday may end as the conference date approaches and senior politicians take over national delegations, it does appear that governments, facing desperate energy plights, have been loath to jeopardize a process that might produce tangible benefits.

The main problem to date has not been an excess of sterile ideological debate, but a paucity of ideas for actions that would do more good than harm in the field of renewable energy. The conference process is helping to legitimize renewables, especially in wary developing countries, much as the 1972 Stockholm Conference did for environmental concerns. But, beyond this intangible educational function, what actions by the U.N. could serve the cause? All involved seem to realize that energy problems must be tackled primarily at the national and local levels but that international cooperation and assistance to poorer countries are crucial as well.

Many promising ideas are under discussion. For example, the conference could encourage every nation to undertake a comprehensive assessment of its energy resources, needs, and alternatives in order to put energy planning and the promotion of renewables on a solid footing. It could set up mechanisms for improved international coordination of R & D on new and renewable energy and for the easier exchange of technical information. Assistance that helps build the capacities of poorer countries to develop, adapt, and produce technologies suited to their needs can be pursued. One of the most valuable results of the conference could be a global action plan to meet the crisis of dwindling supplies of firewood, the principal cooking fuel of the world's poor.

Secretary-General Iglesias has avoided calling for grandiose institutions or funds that the rich countries would be in no mood to bankroll. Still, new technical assistance and coordination activities by the U.N. will require modest sums and people to manage them. More broadly, capital assistance for economically justified renewable energy investments in the poor countries, such as that provided by the World Bank, needs to rise. Clearly, greater support for energy progress in developing countries is required from Western donors and oil-exporting countries alike.

The United States has long urged the U.N. to focus on specific, practical matters and to avoid the proliferation of institutions and special funds. Such realism has characterized preparations for the Nairobi Conference and a productive meeting seems possible.—ERIK ECKHOLM, *International Institute for Environment and Development*, 1302 18th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036