

Now, an implementation problem

Robert Stein writes on the United Nations Water Conference which took place last month

THE UN Water Conference finished its work on 25 March in Mar del Plata, Argentina, and the ripple was slight. Most of the reports coming out of the conference said nothing much happened, which was taken by reporters on the scene to be either good or bad. That no serious political controversy disrupted this conference in the way that political issues tore apart the end of the UN Human Settlements Conference in Vancouver last June was certainly positive. There was a lot of serious discussion both by those with technical expertise and those concerned with the political implications of the various uses of water. On the negative side, the lack of exciting controversy did not result in very many concrete advances, and this is seen as a failure of the conference since the problems are still waiting to be addressed.

But what was the conference trying to do—and did it come at all close to accomplishing its purposes? The representatives who journeyed many thousands of miles to participate in the conference—over one thousand of them from 116 states—had been given documentation which contained both good and bad news. There was enough water globally but, as Gilbert F. White put it in the basic UN background paper, "Frustratingly, it tends to be available in the wrong place, at the wrong time, or with the wrong quality." Yet for the developed world, the bulk of the problems had until the past few years not been theirs. Pollution, yes, but there was little expectation that a UN conference could help advance their perception of the problems. Then in the summer of 1976, water shortages in northern Europe, and the lack of snow in North America the following winter woke others up to the fact that drought was not merely a problem for the Sahel. Sound water management begins at home.

At the same time this conference, ill prepared as it was (the preparatory committee meeting in January had only one day to review the draft of the plan of action), had a specific charge, provided by the UN Human Settlements: to consider targets for supply of potable water and waste disposal.

Many of the countries of the under-

developed world addressed water supply as their most pressing problem. Kenya, Tanzania, Nepal, and Pakistan all issued pleas to the conference for help. A number of African countries called for a new special fund to assist countries in water supply and waste disposal—a cry which was not answered. Instead, the conference adopted a resolution calling for a study to figure out how to finance a variety of water development projects, a study which would not exclude the possibility of a fund.

Additionally, and more importantly, the conference approved a resolution put forward by Argentina, the host government, which called upon governments needing improved water supply and waste disposal systems to prepare programmes and plans by 1980 to reach the Habitat goals of water for all rural and urban areas by 1990. These plans would then be reviewed to determine how they could best be funded. Interestingly, the problems of maintaining broken-down systems, which are usually ignored, were made an integral part of the recommendations. The resolution was much less specific on which body or organisation would help with the implementation, but that was left for the UN's Economic and Social Council to work out. The conference dealt only generally with problems of water in arid lands and drought, preferring to let the Deserts Conference, this August, tackle that issue.

Management of shared river basins contributed greatly to whatever substantive disagreements took place at the conference. The division was usually according to a country's place in the basin: 'upstream' countries which could hold back water or pollute it to the detriment of those who were 'downstream' banded together, providing such groupings as India against Bangladesh on the Ganges; Turkey against Syria and Iraq on the Euphrates; Brazil against Argentina on the Parana; and Germany, Switzerland and France against the Netherlands on the Rhine. The resulting recommendation was clearly a political compromise urging cooperation and using the waters of the basin equitably in accordance with principles of international law. Advance consultation was also watered down, with no mandatory requirements. The work of international legal bodies was also encouraged, though given past per-

formances, many disputes—acrimonious as well as peaceable—will arise before these groups conclude their work.

The conference ended positively. An attempt to introduce a statement, which most aptly would have been called the "Declaration of Mar del Platitude", was defeated; instead the recommendations themselves were enshrined. But after the delegates packed their bathing suits and stacks of documents, and left the shining sea and all the plain-clothes police behind, what is next?

UN Conferences can only be a reflection of the willingness of member states to do something. Agreeing to a fund does not necessarily provide any real money to build water supply systems or irrigation works. A conference must—and the UN Water Conference just barely did—supply tools enabling countries and international aid-giving agencies to act in specific directions if they so choose. They are not law making conferences, like the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea is meant to be, nor can they be in two weeks. The proof is in the implementation, a part of the conference process too often ignored both by governments and the UN system.

So the questions remain. How will governments react to the proposals when they are presented to the UN Economic and Social Council in July? How many governments will make efforts—which they otherwise would not have done—over the absence of the water supply programme or the provision of aid and technical assistance to those that need it? How will the conference affect programmes of international agencies such as the World Bank, WHO, FAO, WMO, UNDP, UNICEF and all the others who came to the conference to make sure they weren't cut out of the action? These will be the tests of success or failure, and though it is too early really to gauge success, the record of the international community is not a very hopeful one. □



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