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In need of a burst of energy

The United Nations Conference on New Energy Sources - to be staged later this summer - has so far proved a story of torpor. But matters could change, writes Walter C. Patterson

When the United Nations announced that it was to stage a conference on energy, old UN conference hands at once turned their minds to acronyms. The ubiquitous acronyms of UN speak are a language unto themselves; what new and incomprehensible clump of letters would be chosen to stand for the new conference? Would it be simply the UN Energy Conference: UNEC ? That would have an unfortunate ring to it, giving the conference the ominous aura of sterility from the outset. The organisers avoided that pitfall, but came perilously close to another. They called the gathering the UN Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy: which could well yield the all too pronounceable acronym UNCNARSE. But the organizers chose arbitrarily to omit the A, making the acronym UNCNRSE - at once unpronounceable and unintelligible.

This grotesque label may be one reason why UK media have so scarcely mentioned the conference due to take place in Nairobi, Kenya, August 10 to 21 this year. It should not go thus unremarked. Unlike many other UN megaconferences, the UN new-energy conference has genuine potential for practical and functional results, and - outside the UK - is beginning to excite real enthusiasm.

The granddaddy of the UN megaconferences was, of course, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in June 1972. The Stockholm conference led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi, the first UN agency based in a Third World country. Since the Stockholm conference, there have been UN conferences on population, food, women, human settlements, growing progressively feebler and more futile, and reaching their nadir in 1979 with the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development, a monumental waste of time and effort, which should by rights have settled for good and all the UN conference concept as a vehicle for constructive international cooperation.

However by that time the UN was already beginning to plan for a conference specifically on the energy technologies called "new and renewable". The objective of the conference was "to promote the development and utilization of new and renewable sources of energy with a view to contributing to satisfaction of overall energy requirements, especially those of developing countries . . . The conference and its preparatory process will provide the opportunity for nations to examine the present and future potential of alternative sources of energy and enable governments to elaborate policies applicable to their national programmes."

Worthy sentiments? But to many the conference sounded more of a response to current fashion than an opportunity for real progress in the energy field. Indeed, on the basis of the track record and the opening moves for this conference there was ample evidence that UNEC might be much the most appropriate acronym after all. Throughout 1980 the preparations for the Nairobi Conference got further and further behind schedule.

Only a handful of Governments submitted their "national plans" describing and assessing the roles of new energy technologies in their countries. Many UN functionaries were far from keen about holding the conference in Nairobi, instead of the traditional conference cities of New York, Geneva,

or Vienna, with their cosy and copious amenities and distractions. The various specialist panels preparing conference papers were appointed late; and their deliberations seemed likely to finish embarrassingly close to the conference itself.

Matters came to a head in late 1980 when the Conference Secretary-General asked to be relieved of his position. In his place UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim appointed the Uruguayan economist Enrique Iglesias; and suddenly the prospects for the Nairobi Conference began to brighten as Iglesias threw himself with vigour into revitalising the conference process. By the time Iglesias took over, at the beginning of February, 1981, the eight technical panels had submitted their status reports on solar energy, biomass energy, wind power, hydropower, fuel wood and charcoal, geothermal energy, ocean energy, and oil shale and tar sands.

Each report identified technologies immediately applicable and significant; the main constraints limiting their utilisation in the next ten to twenty years; and the means to overcome these constraints. The curiously named Ad-Hoc Groups of Experts had prepared and submitted their reports on six major issues cutting across different energy sectors: financing; information flow; research and development and transfer of technology; education and training; rural energy including the utilisation of energy in agriculture; and industrial issues including utilisation of energy in transport and allied sectors. This avalanche of paper was funnelled into the hands of the "synthesis group" to "elaborate in a single document a concise synthesis of the findings and recommendations of all these groups" for submission to the official conference Preparatory Committee. This synthesis report emerged in early March, 1981.

It might be noted in passing that the national report from the UK Government on Renewable Energy Sources in the United Kingdom, which should have been submitted by December 31, 1980, appears to have been available for circulation by the UN only as of March 13, 1981. However, since it is a mere nine pages long, consists almost entirely of sweeping generalities, and is essentially dismissive of all the various renewable energy technologies, its presumed absence from the preparatory deliberations cannot be counted a grievous loss.

The synthesis report in turn elicited critiques from many directions. One analysis, for instance, was prepared by a working group at the University of Sussex, supported by the International Development Research Centre of Canada and the UK Department of Energy. This group concluded that "the most striking impression of the [synthesis report] is its blandness, and the consequent air of unreality: a misleading impression is given of a unanimity of purpose and lack of conflict!" The group found that the report over-emphasised the supply side of the energy picture. The group stressed the need to identify what energy problems actually exist, and how they differ between developed and developing countries, and between urban and rural areas, especially the rural areas of developing countries. The group also point to the need to distinguish between technical and non-technical solutions to these various problems.

Other critiques of the official pre-conference paper rapidly proliferated. UN non-governmental organisations met in Tunisia in March 1981, a meeting which provided an opportunity for a thus-far unique interaction between government and non-government energy people from both the North and the South. The Tunisia meeting called for recognition of conservation and energy efficiency in both North and South to be promoted by the Nairobi conference as a "new source of energy": and called also for increased technical assistance in training for energy planning in developing countries.

By the end of May non-governmental organizations from many parts of the world were girding themselves for a coherent and concentrated lobbying effort with their national governments before and after the Nairobi conference. The energy issues concerning them ranged from financial

assistance for energy research and development, to an attack on the serious fuel-wood crisis, to research into the role of transnational corporations in Third World energy development. The NGOs will have a prominent presence at the Nairobi conference, staging their own conference there, August 10 to 14 and holding an NGO forum and publishing a conference newspaper commenting on the issues and infighting at the official conference itself. Indeed the NGOs appear thus far to have made much of the running before the official conference; NGO ideas have provided a cutting edge all too often lacking in official analyses and commentaries.

The final Preparatory Committee meeting of the Nairobi Conference will take place in New York in mid-June. After a shaky start, the indications are that the conference may yet provide a real opportunity for constructive and practical international energy policy making. It could underpin commitments from international bodies like the World Bank to fund alternative energy in developing countries. It could further the detailed analysis of actual energy requirements in developing countries. It could lead to the establishment of regional energy research centres not tied to commercial petroleum or nuclear interests, and able to help with energy assessment, policy planning, implementation of appropriate substitutes for fossil fuels and innovations in efficiency and conservation. Above all the conference could prompt the governments of the industrial North to take the new energy technologies more seriously.

Indeed, such technologies could become a focus for reciprocal cooperation between North and South, an opportunity for mutual and beneficial assistance. They could call it UENERGY.

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