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THE QUESTION OF SUBJECT AREAS*

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1. Origin

The question of subject areas has been and remains the subject of much controversy, and an objective analysis will probably be helpful. It was first raised in the deliberations of the 1974 Panel of Experts (E/AC.52/KK/CRP.16). The Panel suggested, with specific reference to item 1 of the proposed agenda (science and technology for development) that a limited number of interrelated subject areas which were particularly dependent on economic factors - food and agriculture, energy, natural resources, industrialization and tropical diseases - should be selected for in-depth study. These "vertical" subject areas, combined with the "horizontal" subitems of agenda item 1 (human, social and institutional factors, education and training; new science and choice of technology; management and systems; methodology and conditions for the transfer of technology; exchange of information; cooperation and structures for cooperation), would have constituted a 35-block matrix. The entire matrix would be the subject of a series of horizontal and vertical preparatory activities at the expert level.

2. The two approaches

At the 1975 Intergovernmental Working Group of the Committee on Science and Technology for Development (E/C.8/28), two opinions emerged with regard to the agenda for the Conference. The first - similar to the position taken by the Panel of Experts - was that the Conference could best attain its objectives by concentrating on a small number of subject areas. The other view was that the key issue was the study of basic policy problems in the field of science and technology and that fragmentation of this over-all view into technical subjects was undesirable.

A middle view was that the basic problems should be studied in the light of the favourable or unfavourable experience acquired in specific areas.

These divergencies were again apparent at the third session of the Committee on Science and Technology for Development (E/5777, paragraph 44) and, as a compromise, the following intermediate solution was adopted and later embodied in Economic and Social Council resolution 2028 (LXI), endorsed by General Assembly resolution 31/184:

/'3. A limited

"3. A limited number of subject areas will be selected with a view to providing important matters for analysis and discussion of the issues listed in the agenda, on the basis of national priorities, through the preparatory process in accordance with the criteria set forth below; the subject areas should:

- a) Be few, with a maximum of five;
- b) Be defined as problem areas with economic and social implications that may be solved by utilizing science and technology;
- c) Require an integrated and interdisciplinary approach and an interagency approach;
- d) Have clear relevance to problems of development in all countries, especially developing countries, and emerge from national priorities through regional consensus;
- e) Be clearly delineated and limited in scope."

There is another reference to subject areas in Economic and Social Council resolution 2035 (LXI), paragraph 1 (c), which states that one of the elements of the national papers would be "The selection, from among the sub-items of the proposed agenda, of specific examples illustrating the different approaches to the applications of science and technology for dealing with the subject areas".

The question of the subject areas gives rise to two problems:

- a) How to select them;
- b) What is their real significance.

3. The selection of subject areas

At the 1975 Working Group of the Committee on Science and Technology for Development, divergent views emerged over whether the choice of subject areas should be made at the beginning of the process of preparing for the Conference (as suggested by the Panel of Experts, admittedly, in another context), or should be carried out during the national, regional and global analyses.

For practical reasons, it was suggested in the Preparatory Committee (E/C.8/L.74, and A/32/43, paragraph 13) that the first exercise at the national

level might be the choice of subject areas, which would be refined during a first series of regional meetings and at the second session of the Preparatory Committee.

On the other hand, a literal interpretation of Economic and Social Council resolution 2028 (LXI) indicated that the selection of subject areas was to come after all the national and regional processes, but one of the serious disadvantages of that approach was that it provided no means of incorporating the subject areas into the national and regional analyses and left undefined for far too long the role in the Conference of specialized agencies and bodies without across-the-board competence.

Here again, an intermediate solution was adopted, that of choosing subject areas at a first series of regional meetings on the basis of suggestions by Member States, with a final choice being made at the second session of the Preparatory Committee at the end of January 1978 (decision 1 (I) of the Preparatory Committee, paragraph 5, A/32/43, annex II). This system "parallel" selection with activities at the national level gives rise, as will be seen, to certain problems.

4. Subject areas and priorities

The Preparatory Committee has stated that the subject areas in no way constitute world, regional or even national priorities, but rather subjects selected on the basis of the criteria set forth in resolution 2028 (LXI), in document A/32/43, paragraph 30, and in decision 2(I), paragraph 8.

Such a distinction between subject areas and priorities has the advantage of:

- a) Simplifying considerably the selection of the subject areas at all levels;
- b) Avoiding the complex process of reconsidering subject areas which are regarded as being of high priority at the national, subregional or regional levels and which were eliminated during the selection process (E/C.8/28, paragraph 35; E/5855, paragraph 35).

/At present

At present there is no competent authority and no machinery for selecting regional or world priorities, nor for that matter for identifying the problems of primary interest to developing countries. The wisest course, therefore, is to speak only of national priorities, which are, moreover, the only priorities recognized in Council resolution 2028 (LXI). Naturally, that does not preclude the possibility that selection processes might emerge from the Conference itself, but that is not yet the case.

5. Significance of the subject areas

In the Preparatory Committee, a difference of opinion arose about the exact nature and purpose of the subject areas. The Committee's decision was that the subject areas would be selected "to illustrate in detail the nature, the consequences, the scientific and technological implications and the possible solutions to the problems identified therein." (Decision 2 (I), paragraph 8.)

In addition, the Preparatory Committee visualizes the inclusion of subject areas other than those specified in Economic and Social Council resolution 2028 (LXI):

"The treatment of the various subitems of items 1 to 3 should be illustrated by reference to specific examples (see Council resolution 2035 (LXI), paragraph 1 (c)), which should be selected on the basis of national priorities and according to the criteria laid down in Council resolution 2028 (LXI), paragraph 3, section II, item 3. Should this not be possible, it would be important for at least a significant proportion of the selected specific examples to be taken from subject areas that do approach the requirement that they should have 'clear relevance to problems of development in all countries, especially developing countries'. These subject areas will be used as a basis for the regional and interregional discussions that will lead to the final choice of subject areas by the Preparatory Committee. In the case of developed countries, the specific examples should be drawn from subject areas that are relevant to the problems of the developing countries. It is not intended that the specific examples used in the papers should be subjected to substantive technical discussion; their treatment should serve rather to illustrate in a concrete manner the conclusions to be drawn from the analysis.

^In selecting

"In selecting specific examples, countries could, where appropriate, use the World Plan of Action for the Application of Science and Technology to Development and particularly the regional plans of action. It would not be necessary, however, for them to follow a sectoral approach in the presentation of the subject-matter." (Decision 2 (I), paragraphs 42-43.)

Finally, as stated in the Preparatory Committee's report, "Some delegations noted that the selection of subject areas for the Conference should not assume too great an importance and that the main emphasis should be on science and technology as a tool of development."

Thus, a definite change has taken place in the concept of subject areas.

6. Inclusion of subject areas in national papers

Owing to problems of timing (since the time-limit for national analyses is 1 May 1978, whereas the final selection of the subject areas will take place towards the end of January 1978), it is not clear how national papers can take the subject areas duly into account.

In practice they can be used only in the regional analyses, and even then problems of timing arise.

The Preparatory Committee has admittedly foreseen the possibility that, following the selection by the Preparatory Committee of the limited number of subject areas, "countries may be required to supplement their national country studies at a later stage before the Conference by reviewing such areas in the light of the present guidelines." (Decision 2 (I), paragraph 35.)

