

Editorial

WITH THE APPROACH of the twentieth anniversary of the creation of UNCTAD it may perhaps be appropriate for that organization to take a hard look at its general effectiveness. The results of UNCTAD VI in Belgrade were not expected to be very great, but in fact turned out to be considerably less than was hoped. Although there was a little progress on subjects which UNCTAD has made peculiarly its own, such as support for the common fund, technology, shipping, land-locked countries and islands, the results on the broader issues were negligible. The developing countries extracted a reluctant reaffirmation from the industrialized countries of help for the least developed countries, promises already made in Paris in 1981, but the resolution on international trade was scarcely an advance, if at all, on the Ministerial Declaration in GATT of 1982, and the resolutions on debts and monetary policy were nothing more than petitions to the developed countries and the IMF.

If the question is asked, Why do these meetings continue? it is to be remembered that it is a great comfort both to the industrialized nations and the Soviet bloc that the legitimate demands of the developing world should be so successfully contained, and at such comparatively little trouble and expense.

It was in connection with UNCTAD that the group system of negotiation first made its appearance, and it was expected that if the Group of 77 could formulate proposals of general benefit to developing countries, based on reason and justice, then the rest of the world would be willing to accede to them. This has, however, been by no means the case, and even moderate proposals of the 77 have been turned down without hesitation. It therefore seems that group negotiations, at least within the forum of UNCTAD, are unlikely to produce any benefits in future, and it is perhaps time for the UNCTAD secretariat to go into conclave in order to determine, even if the game cannot be changed, whether it might not be possible to alter some of the rules.

The present role of the UNCTAD secretariat is a dual one. On the one hand it has to perform the normal functions of a United Nations secretariat in the even-handed promotion of negotiations between all its members, while at the same time it has become the *de facto* assistant to the Group of 77. In the absence of any kind of third world secretariat this is perhaps inevitable, and is accepted to a certain degree by the other groups, whose reaction has been to bring in their own representatives from OECD and COMECON to service their own internal caucus meetings. The result is that the secretariat finds itself at times in the

position of a servant of the 77, and is not free even to investigate action which might not be in the interests of the group as a whole.

If the secretariat were at liberty to adopt a more impartial role, it would be able to examine selected areas and topics more closely where genuine negotiations might be possible, that is to say, where some countries have something to give and where corresponding advantages may be obtained by others.

Attention to this has already been directed by the Commonwealth Group of Experts,¹ whose report was reviewed in our issue of November last. The experts recommend in particular that the 77 should form a representative committee of as little as eight members (although it might well be larger) that would act in the general interests of the 77 as a whole, on the lines adopted in the UNCLOS negotiations or the Group of Twenty in the IMF. Such a procedure would relieve the UNCTAD secretariat of its duty to the 77 and enable it to move back towards its true role as a UN secretariat.

¹ *The North-South Dialogue: Making it Work*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, 1982.