

## UNERG – A SUCCESS

Although the August 1981 United Nations conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy (UNERG) has been called a bust by *Science* and *New Scientist* magazines, I believe this will prove to be an inaccurate historical view. To make my point, it is first necessary to understand the character of the conference. UNERG was a conference of governments charged with recommending an organization for supporting new and renewable sources of energy and providing future funding for them. Secondarily, the conference was to identify priority areas of action.

“New and Renewable” sources of energy were defined to include fourteen technologies: solar (including active, passive, photovoltaics, and solar thermal), geothermal, wind, tidal power, wave power, ocean thermal gradients, biomass conversion, fuelwood, charcoal, peat, energy from draught animals, oil shale, tar sands, and hydropower. Conservation and nuclear energy were considered but were excluded for nontechnical reasons. This long list was narrowed down in the minds of most delegates to the most widely available sources: solar, biomass conversion, fuelwood, and charcoal. Countries with a strong resource base in one of the other ten areas found no need to force attention on them—emphasis was on the U.N. system and the concept of self-sufficiency for development—not on specific technologies.

It is also important to explain what the conference was not. It was not a technical conference with scientific papers. It was not open to any interested individual; attendance was limited to official delegates, some of whom had technical expertise. It was not exploratory and open ended—most of the discussion centered on a draft course of action. It was not detailed—later work was intended to establish a detailed plan. It was not the end of a long process—rather it was an intermediate step. It was not of equal importance to all countries—it was generally of most importance to developing countries with a severe energy problem. It did not attract the attention it deserved—a simultaneous OPEC meeting received much greater press coverage.

However, in my mind, the conference was exceptionally important. The tangible product of the two-week endeavor in Nairobi, Kenya, was the “Nairobi Programme of Action” (NPA). The NPA, approved unanimously, contained the required recommendations for a U.N. structure, funding, and priority actions. Why, then, should it be considered a failure? The answer lies in understanding the compromises required to achieve unanimity. The initial U.S. position was that a new U.N. institution and incremental funding were unacceptable—a position the United States holds on almost any U.N. topic. Rather, the United States wished the NPA to emphasize the private sector, national responsibilities, and bilateral cooperation. The United States did, however, agree in principle to a modest new organization with incremental

funding and strongly supported the final priorities. Whether the United States would have held out if the other countries had insisted on a stronger organization and funding is now problematical. With a decision to leave most of the details to a subsequent conference in New York, the United States may have only delayed the inevitable.

Many delegates and observers wanted a more powerful organization and substantial funding; consequently, they and the press labeled the conference a failure and placed the blame on the United States. I feel, mostly for ethical reasons, that the U.S. position may have been wrong. However, I believe it will change, mostly for practical reasons. It obviously is in everyone’s best interest to raise the world’s standard of living, and the proposed new U.N. organization should accelerate that change. The United States also will benefit from any mechanism for discussing energy issues in the United Nations—these issues have thus far been excluded. Also, the potential for converting OPEC funds into renewable energy marketing activities, in which the United States has a sizable technological lead, should overcome other reasons for hesitancy. Lastly, the October Cancun conference seems to indicate that the Reagan administration can accept mild forms of international multilateral development assistance.

Thus, my argument that the conference was successful is partly based on anticipated future events. A one-year delay may even be desirable as the economics of solar energy catch up with the promise of solar energy. However, even if a weak U.N. institution eventually comes forth, I believe that the conference already has accomplished enough to be called a success. Here are my reasons:

First, each of the 120 countries at the conference was asked to present an official policy toward renewable energy. Almost without exception, each country found that renewable energy was valuable. (Inexplicably, the least enthusiasm was shown by the U.S.S.R.) The reluctance of the United States to endorse a new U.N. institution was never portrayed as a reflection on the potential of renewable energy technologies. Indeed, the United States took pride in being the world leader on most conference topics.

A preconference fear that the developing countries would reject the renewable energy technologies because they are not used extensively by the developed countries never materialized. Preconference reports clearly showed a widespread and growing use—mostly in the developed countries. There must have been a fear that the developing countries were being left behind. Some countries possibly also had a fear that the developed countries would not be willing to share in their gain.

The conference was also a success because renewable energy is now clearly seen as a necessary ingredient for long-term development. Identification of petroleum as the key energy source has ceased; its use is being discouraged everywhere in order to balance international accounts. Importation of coal or nuclear fuel is viewed in almost the same way—especially

since either is only usable in a power plant whose expense is beyond the means of most countries. Hence, for development, renewable energy sources seem to have disadvantages only in short-term economics and some developing countries even sense that they may have an economic advantage because of low wage rates.

The issue of renewable energy for development was most obvious in the NPA identification of priorities. A developed country effort to place emphasis on fuelwood was countered by a developing country insistence that equal emphasis be placed on urban and industrial applications.

Third, the conference precipitated a wide range of new renewable energy work by international organizations, especially those within the U.N. system. The conference probably accelerated a natural inclination toward renewable energy in such traditional developmental areas as food, health, industrialization, and education. Early fears that the conference was so poorly organized as to preclude success were countered by strong final work following the naming of a new director – Enrique Iglesias.

Lastly, the conference had educational value. The 4,000 delegates could visit exhibits from fourteen countries; the commercial availability of almost every technology must have surprised some. Sales initiated and consummated will bring many more countries into a more active developmental role. Although this was not a trade fair, probably never have so many key energy officials been exposed to such a strong sales and educational effort in renewable energy technologies. The Kenyan, Mexican, Indian, and Brazilian exhibits clearly showed that manufacturing is possible in a developing country.

A simultaneous conference of nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) provided additional information for and pressure on the delegates. Principal issues pertained to conservation, the environment, nuclear moratoria, public participation, rural energy, and the role of women. Many of these concerns were incorporated in the final NPA. Although generally disappointed in the final conference results, the NGOs were more involved than in most previous U.N. conferences and probably strengthened themselves considerably for future international cooperation to promote renewable energy.

The failure of this first U.N. energy conference to reach complete accord is similar to what happened in previous conferences on other topics, such as the environment, women, and oceans, and is typical of a first conference on any important international issue. This condition undoubtedly will only be temporary. However, although a permanent structure and funding were the primary official objectives, they probably would not have been the most important results in any case. More important are the new international consciousness about renewable energy, the recognition of its importance in development, the initiation of much new work, and education. At a time of discouragement for most U.S. solar enthusiasts, there is reason for hope in international challenges and opportunities. A revolutionary worldwide change toward renewable energy production is occurring. This conference will eventually be seen as an important contribution to that change.

**Ronal W. Larson**  
**Golden, Colorado**