

Agenda Item 92 (d): Science and Technology for Development

Statement by Hon'ble Mr. N.D. Tiwari, MP, Chairman, Public Accounts Committee

on October 6, 2000

Mr. Chairman,

We have read with interest the report A/55/96, though we regret that due attention could not be accorded to its consideration when it was submitted to the Economic and Social Council earlier this year. In these days of enhanced focus on peace-keeping operations and the need for increasing the resources available to the Secretariat for this end, it is important to recall the equally legitimate, and perhaps, more important from a developing country perspective, the concern repeatedly expressed by the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and UNCTAD over the lack of resources. The succinct report before us clearly notes that "there is a need for additional resources to be allocated to the UNCTAD Secretariat to create, design, implement and operate" information exchange systems to ensure greater coordination in system-wide activities for science and technology and for information sharing and knowledge diffusion. The report further notes that the current staff have neither the time necessary nor the technical skills to undertake these important tasks. This is the crux of the matter, Mr. Chairman. All activities of the United Nations, notably those in favour of development of developing countries are woefully underfunded and thereby, marginalized. Unless the organisation's role in the developmental sphere is strengthened, as has also been pointed out by the Secretary General, its utility for the vast majority of the people in the developing world, in whose name we seek to act, would be seriously compromised. We hope that the General Assembly would take a positive decision on the request for additional resources contained in the report, and not hold it hostage to an insistence on a zero nominal growth in the regular budget.

Contemporary literature on the development of a knowledge-based society tends to portray the South as a technology deficient zone ignoring the extent to which technological capacities have been built up in the South over the last two decades, and fails to recognize, that what matters today is not the simple acquisition of technology but the capacity to master it and to innovate further.

It is essential that science and technology be imbued with a social consciousness. For example, how can we ensure that biotechnology will help humanity overcome such scourges as hunger and malnutrition without increasing the dependence of developing countries on the scientifically developed world? How can we ensure that progress in prenatal diagnosis, based on advances in genetics, will be used to prevent disease and serious malformations, with treatment in utero as appropriate, rather than as a veiled form of eugenics out to produce the "perfect child"? These are not ethical questions alone, but mirror the broader requirement of science and technology to be responsive to the needs of the vast majority of our populations, agriculturalists, marginal farmers, and the unemployed youth. Relative advances in science and technology that have the potential of changing their lives for the better must be increasingly promoted by the international community. The bio-genetic revolution in the agricultural sphere will offer great opportunities for enhancing the crop-potential, management of biotic and abiotic stresses, bio-remediation, waste management and organic recycling. India is one of the main centres of agricultural bio-diversity and our gene richness can greatly complement the ongoing developments in biotechnology and genetic engineering. Another advantage from our unique perspective as a large predominantly agrarian economy is that the genetic revolution is relatively scale-neutral, in principle, benefitting the large and small farmers alike. We have, therefore, decided to focus on prevalent and important Indian crops like rice and mustard and have also established a National Centre for Plant Genome Research. We hope that a

synthesis of our 'green revolution' with the 'gene revolution' would truly produce a 'nutritional revolution' enabling the Indian farmer to ensure country's self-reliance in agricultural produce.

Mr. Chairman,

Revolutionary developments in information and communication technologies have opened a new vista for sharing knowledge amongst us. If properly utilized they would not only enhance the competitiveness of developing countries in the global marketplace and increase their exports, but would also lead to the creation of a new society, through cooperation at all levels in science and technology, in which the primordial organizational principle would be the quality of life, not simply the differential advantage of wealth, defined only by relative impoverishment of others. Recognising that information technology to be successful must be pro-people and pro-development, India is not only developing its capacities in the field of information technology at par with the developed nations, but also simultaneously pursuing the mammoth social objective of IT for All by 2008, whose centre-piece is a major national campaign 'Operation Knowledge' focusing on universalising IT and IT-based education at all levels of the education pyramid.

It is abundantly clear that, though important, Information Technology is no panacea for all developmental problems. The real challenge lies in its potential and impact on broader developmental goals. It must enhance productivity in small and medium enterprises, which are the backbone of the economy of many developing countries, it must provide useful and productive employment to the youth, and must promote literacy, knowledge-sharing and social emancipation. Only then would it have served its true purpose.

Apart from macro-level initiatives at the global and national level, we must also not lose sight of appropriate technologies, that at low cost have the potential of promoting local community-based development, enhancing the capacities of our small and village level industries and providing employment. While large scale power plants are required, we must also continue to focus on mini-hydro-electric power generation, solar and bio-mass energy, use of satellite remote sensing and oceanography to improve the fishing catch of traditional fishermen and the like. While thinking big, we must always be conscious of what Schumacher aptly called that "Small is Beautiful", and to which, I would add, that often "Small is Cardinal".