

**Remarks by Mr. José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General, OAS**  
**Opening Ceremony**  
**Fifth Ministerial Meeting of Agriculture and Rural Life in the Americas**  
**“Building Capacity for Enhancing Food Security and Rural Life in the Americas,”**  
**5:00 pm, October 27, 2009**

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The Honorable Bruce Golding, Prime Minister of Jamaica

The Honorable Dr. Christopher Tufton, Minister of Agriculture & Fisheries  
of Jamaica

Dr. Chelston Brathwaite, Director General of IICA

Special Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon.

I am honored to be here in Jamaica to participate in this important Ministerial Meeting on enhancing food security and rural life in the Americas. I present my congratulations and appreciation to my good friend, Dr. Chelston Brathwaite, for his leadership and tireless efforts to invigorate the mandate of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) during his tenure. Dr. Brathwaite, you have brought a new perspective on the role of agriculture in the development by arguing that, to reduce poverty in our Hemisphere, we must focus on the cross-cutting impacts of agriculture and rural life on our food security, health, nutrition, education, social development, energy, economic growth and democratic governance.

I wish to also commend you, Mr. Director General, for your leadership in further institutionalizing the linkages between the Inter-American

Ministerial meetings and the Summit of the Americas process. For example, ministerial representatives met yesterday and today in the context of the Summit Implementation Review Group on Agriculture (GRICA) to build consensus about the commitments made at previous Summits. IICA is also a valuable partner of the Organization of American States (OAS) in the Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG), which helps the member States implement the various Summit mandates.

Mr. Director General, the issue of food security was not high on the agenda of the governments of the Latin America and the Caribbean when you began your tenure as the Head of in 2002. At that time, many of our economies were growing steadily, the global economy was booming and all signs were that we were making strides in alleviating poverty in this Hemisphere and the world. Despite this relatively rosy picture, you had the foresight to include food security as one of the three pillars of IICA's Mission. You have been persistent in your call for increased attention to this problem. As it turns out, you were correct to do so. Today, with the global economy still struggling to emerge from recession and the countries of the Americas feeling the negative effects of the economic downturn, the issue of food security and the need for increased attention and investment in the agricultural sector and rural communities is now more urgent than ever.

The UN's Economic Commission of Latin American and the Caribbean, ECLAC, is now concerned that the 5 years of positive economic growth in Latin America (2002-2007) may be undermined by the current economic crisis. They report that the approximately 27 million people who had

managed to emerge from poverty in those good years will likely continue to slip back into poverty. This situation will make it very difficult for some countries in our Hemisphere to reach the Millennium Development Goal of reducing poverty by 50% by the year 2015.

The World Food Program is also concerned that despite lower fuel and food prices, the global economic recession is making hunger a reality for millions of people once again.

We therefore cannot relax in our efforts to improve food security and reduce poverty in our region.

Our hemisphere is too rich in resources, technology and ideas, for any man, woman or child to go hungry. We have the natural and human resources to produce enough healthy food for our domestic consumption, as well as for export. We must exploit these resources by addressing the various challenges to our food security, which include: diminishing investment in the agricultural sector and rural communities; a younger generation that is uninterested in a career in agriculture; diminishing fertile land for farming due to unchecked land degradation; the impacts of climate change on land and water resources; extreme weather events and natural disasters; and the need for social safety nets, such as insurance, for the farming sector.

These challenges are not insurmountable, if we work together and embrace the multidimensional approach to agricultural and rural

development being advocated by IICA and recently reaffirmed by the leaders of this Hemisphere.

The Latin American and Caribbean region has become increasingly urbanized over the past few decades, with only 22% of our population now residing in rural areas. The global average is 50% of the population residing in rural areas. Urban areas receive the majority of the investments in social services, security and infrastructure. In order to really make our food supplies secure, the Governments of this Hemisphere must increase investment in the education, health, training and capacity building and public security of the rural communities, whose residents grow our food.

The OAS is already taking some critical actions to promote rural development and food security. We recently launched the **Inter-American Social Protection Network** to fight poverty and inequality in the Americas. The network will facilitate the exchange of best practices in social protection programs, like Brazil's Bolsa Familia, Chile's Solidario, Colombia's Familias en Acción, and Mexico's Oportunidades. These programs have helped reduce national poverty rates in their respective countries. They really are an investment in our most precious resource, our people.

Our Sustainable Development Department is also helping to bolster the resilience of rural communities by: providing renewable energy options appropriate for rural settings; working through our Inter-American Natural Disaster network to reduce the impact of extreme weather events on the

livelihoods of rural communities; promoting strategies that protect stressed water resources; and protecting biodiversity. All of these actions are critical to rural development and food security.

As I've said on other occasions, I am concerned that the socio-economic pressures caused by challenges such as poverty and food insecurity will erode some of the hard fought political gains of recent decades. Latin America and the Caribbean have made great strides on the democratic front, particularly in terms of holding free and fair elections and having all sides accept the results. But, for the democratic system to truly take hold in our region, the people have to see and experience its benefits. These benefits must include being able to work and feed one's family. These benefits must include people having access to social safety nets in those times when they are unable to find work or food. However, in many of our countries work and food are scarce and social protection networks are still a luxury.

Poverty and food insecurity threaten the sustainability of our democracies, because hunger can drive people to protest in the streets. I'm sure that you all recall the riots on the streets of Haiti a few years ago due to a shortage in basic foodstuffs, which led to the eventual resignation of then Prime Minister. This is an extreme case, but it demonstrates how social and economic problems can quickly transform into political problems.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that we now have the political will in many of our countries to effectively modernize the agricultural sector, and to tackle poverty and the challenges to food security.

The Caribbean region has already embraced the *Jagdeo Initiative*, spearheaded by President Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana, which seeks to reposition agriculture in the sustainable development plan for the Caribbean. It presents agriculture as a business and as a holistic sector, with backward and forward linkages with other sectors of the region's economy. This initiative was prepared in consultation with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the IICA and the CARICOM Secretariat.

During the recent Presidential Summit in Port of Spain, the thirty-four elected leaders of our Hemisphere put aside their differences and agreed to a shared agenda for improving human prosperity in this Hemisphere. The result of their open dialogue was a clear hemispheric agenda, which addressed the shared areas of concern: the economic recovery, public security, democratic governance, energy, climate change, social protection and the rights of migrants.

An important facet of this Hemispheric Agenda was the leaders' reaffirmation of their commitment to the AgroPlan 2003-2015 and to a multidimensional approach to agricultural development in the Hemisphere (paras 23-25, Declaration of Commitment). The implementation of these mandates should contribute significantly to an enhanced agricultural sector in our countries, as well as to improved food

security, the promotion of human prosperity, environmental sustainability and the consolidation of democracy in our Hemisphere.

The OAS stands ready to work with IICA, other inter-American partners and our Member States to make these mandates a reality.

Thank you.