

WELCOME ADDRESS BY **THE DIRECTOR  
GENERAL OF IICA** TO THE INTERNATIONAL  
FORUM “WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: THE  
CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TO AGRICULTURE  
AND TO FOOD SECURITY IN THE AMERICAS”

By your leave, Madam Chair, it is a great honor to have you with us today.

Ms. Elena Correa Monroy is a young woman who lives with her husband and two daughters in a place in Colombia. The area where she lives has been affected by violence but that has not deterred her from continuing to work on behalf of her family and her community.

Orfa Uni Cruz is a young Yanacona indigenous woman from Colombia, the mother of a family that belongs to the Indigenous Association of Women Achira Producers of San Sebastián, whose 32 members cultivate and produce achira.

These two women have something in common: while continuing to work in the home, they are also involved in the *Mujeres Ahorradoras en Acción* project, which is being implemented jointly by the Colombian government and IICA. Elena says this has enabled her to improve her situation “one hundred per cent.” And Orfa states that, “We have all learned to save in order to have our own business and build a better future.”

Their comments are echoed by many of the project’s nearly 32,000 women beneficiaries. Like Elena, they say, “the most important thing is that we are acquiring knowledge and learning to value ourselves as women. We used to let things overwhelm us but now we are focused on being successful... and that is a big change.”

Elena says that before the project she was very shy but now knows how to speak in public. In other words, now she has a voice in her family, among her co-workers and in her community.

Orfa agrees completely. “You begin to discuss things as a family, collaborate and exchanges ideas... on equal terms.”

The association to which Elena belongs under the project, is, as she herself says, a source of great camaraderie and an opportunity to generate income for the household. As she puts it, “Things have changed; we are no longer dependent on our husbands or stuck in the kitchen. Now we are independent.”

Your Excellency Madam Laura Chinchilla, President of the Republic of Costa Rica,  
Honorable Gloria Abraham, Minister of Agriculture and Livestock of Costa Rica and  
Chair of the Thirtieth Regular Meeting of IICA’s Executive Committee,  
Honorable Members of the Executive Committee of IICA,  
Distinguished panelists,  
Friends.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all here today to the House of Agriculture of the Americas, and to have the opportunity to benefit from the sensitivity and intelligence of the women who have come to take part in the Forum “Women in Agriculture: the contribution of women to agriculture and to food security in the Americas.”

This administration decided to take advantage of the meeting of one of its governing bodies to provide an opportunity for reflection on a subject of importance for the agricultural sector and rural life. It is our intention to make this a regular practice. And what better way to begin than with the subject of the contribution that women make to agriculture and food security!

The distinguished women taking part in the forum, each of whom has an outstanding record of achievement and service, will be speaking to us about this issue. I am sure they will talk about how women, as they have endeavored to establish themselves both in agriculture and in other fields, have had to contend with exclusion and inequity. They will also recommend public policies whose implementation would help solve the problems that exist and create the best development opportunities, in accordance with the importance of the contribution that women make to agricultural development.

I would like to recall a few other, simpler contributions made by women that were very important for agriculture.

Thousands of years ago, while the men were out hunting, sometimes for weeks at a time, the women stayed home and took care of the children and saw how different seeds became plants. Then they began to plant and select the fruits of the land that were apt for human consumption. Agriculture had been born and, with it, civilization.

Down years, all over the world, women have been mainly responsible for developing the traditional cuisine of each people, thereby also contributing to the improvement of the species and the levels of nutrition. We should also mention the contribution that women made to the selection of medicinal plants and to the generation of knowledge about the use of herbs to cure various diseases.

As our consultants have discovered, it is still common among indigenous peoples for women to visit their neighbors for a chat and take some of the produce of their vegetable gardens with them, as well as the stalks and seeds of plants that they grow to swap them for other species that their neighbors produce.

It is also common for women of a given community to share secrets about special crops or techniques for eliminating harmful pests.

IICA has always regarded this as a subject of the greatest importance. On its own initiative and at the request of the countries, it has implemented specific projects for the development of rural women and carried out studies and analyses of the issue,

although it remains a field in which far too little work has been done, as we discovered in preparing the document that we will be presenting this morning.

The prizes awarded by the IABA have long included the Inter-American Award for the Participation of Women in Rural Development, which my fellow Mexican, friend and well-known lawmaker Beatriz Paredes, who is here today, received in 1986.

The ever-growing importance of women in agriculture has undoubtedly gone hand in hand with their notable development in the different areas of societies. There are capable women professionals and highly skilled workers, social and opinion leaders, elected representatives and senior government officials.

To take an obvious example, today we are honored to have with us the first woman President in the history of Costa Rica. And the team of women in charge of Costa Rica's Ministry of Agriculture, also headed for the first time by a woman. Coincidentally, IICA has a woman as its Deputy Director General for the first time.

And although much remains to be done on the question of inclusion and equity, each country is making sterling efforts on the issue that we wish to complement with multilateral action.

We hope that the members of the Executive Committee will take on board the recommendations made here and turn them into specific mandates for the Institute.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Mexican humanist Germán Dehesa, who passed away recently. He once wrote that:

"The big development of our time has been the inexorable advance of women, they are unstoppable (...) At this point in history, the best thing men can do is negotiate an honorable surrender, before the world literally collapses around our ears. (...)

"For centuries, women depended on the world and support of men. Night after night, millions of Scheherazades had to invent something for their own private sultans to gain another day of life. It is with profound sadness that I have to inform my male readers that Scheherazade is no longer with us.

No reason to mourn her, though. Instead, let us celebrate the advent of a woman who is not interested in being a slave but prefers just to 'be.' (...) Oh well, boys: it's time for us to rest and do our knitting."

As I share these wise opinions, I shall leave this forum in the hands of its protagonists—women—and as the only man to be given the floor, I make a public commitment to redoubling IICA's efforts so that stories like those of Elena Correa, Orfa Uni and their colleagues are repeated throughout the Americas many times over.

Thank you very much.