

Food Security and Country Led Food Security Plans Top Priority for IICA/OAS Conference Experts

Washington, DC – October, 2009 – “IICA is uniquely positioned to serve the agricultural interests of the 34 member countries in this hemisphere,” said President Bill Clinton, in a taped message to participants and attendees at a joint Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) and Organization of American States (OAS) conference on food security entitled, ‘Agriculture for Development and Food Security in the Americas.’ “In Haiti and elsewhere, under investment in agriculture has weakened our ability to meet the most basic nutritional needs for vast segments of populations....More than a billion people on our planet don’t have enough to eat,” cautioned Clinton. “If we don’t act swiftly, the epidemic of hunger will expand and the poor will continue to move from country side to cities, furthering increasing urban poverty and its associated maladies,” he explained.

Held at the OAS Headquarters, the event served to bring attention to the need and opportunities to invest in agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean; position Food Security for discussion at the Fifth Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Rural Life in the context of the Summit of the Americas process, and the Fifteenth Regular Meeting of the Inter-American Board of Agriculture (IABA), to be held in Jamaica October 2009; raise visibility of the importance of food security and agriculture which was reaffirmed in the Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain, at the Fifth Summit of the Americas and; promote hemispheric workshops throughout 2010, thus leading to the creation of National Food Security Plans in the Member States.

Consisting of key note speakers and two panels, the high level conference included distinguished experts representing universities, government, and international organizations such as: the World Food Programme (WFP); International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI); the United States Department of State (USDOS); the Embassy of Jamaica; the World Bank; the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, (ECLAC); the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); the Latin American Agribusiness Development Corporation (LAAD); the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); Texas A & M University; the University of California-Davis; the Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture; the International Markets Bureau, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Permanent Representative to Jamaica, Ambassador Anthony Johnson and Professor and President Emeriti, Texas A & M University, Dr. Elsa Murano served as moderators for each of the two panels.

“We believe that in many of our member countries, the true contribution of agriculture to development is underestimated,” echoed Dr. Chelston Brathwaite, Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture.” He continued, “The contribution of the Food and Agriculture Sector (or the expanded agricultural sector) is much greater- as much as 5-7 times the traditional measures- than what is reflected in national statistics because it includes all backward and forward linkages in the commodity chains.... Input supplies, transport, storage, agribusiness, contribution to exports, agro-industry, the food industry, financial services for agriculture are all part of the expanded agricultural sector.”

According to Dr. Elsa Murano, experts have come to agree in recent years that in spite of their best efforts at addressing world hunger through foreign assistance programs, they have somewhat neglected to focus on developing the agricultural systems that ultimately can best help people become self-sufficient, and thereby able to prosper. Dr. Murano previously served the Bush Administration as Undersecretary for Food Safety at the US Department of Agriculture.

For IFPRI’s Director General, Dr. Joachim von Braun, food security is further compromised by the following: less capital is available today and in the future for agriculture; more debt incurred,

specifically for small holders; a reduction of employment and wages for low skilled workers; a shift of attention of policies for agriculture and reduction of public investment and; reductions in remittances. Von Braun added that a new pro-poor risk prevention, reduction, and management strategy should be considered. Furthermore, he suggested that the agenda promote agriculture growth with technology and institutional innovations to prevent risks; consist of innovative insurance systems; facilitate open trade and reduce market volatility and; expand social protection and child nutrition action.

“IICA encourages each of its member countries to formalize its own national food security plan,” recommended IICA Associate Deputy Director General, David C. Hatch, Director of Strategic Partnerships and IICA Representative in the United States. “When it comes to agriculture, no organization in the world has the history, experience, perspective and knowledge of IICA at the country level in Latin America and the Caribbean,” he advocated.

Underscoring OAS’ responsibility, OAS Assistant Secretary General, Albert Ramdin, said the Organization has an important role to play in the issue of food security. He proposed initiatives to which the institution can make meaningful contributions. Those included: partnering with IICA to focus political attention on the food security issue; collaborating with the member countries to develop home-grown solutions aimed at improving investment and developing internal and external markets for agriculture; reaching out to financial institutions to garner support that will help implement programs that promote sustainable agriculture; working with governments and educational institutions to bring new emphasis to the role of agriculture in development; encouraging multilateral institutions to provide technical assistance; and working with international institutions to preserve the national agricultural base, expand employment opportunities and reenergize rural economic growth.

One of six key note speakers, USDOS’s Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Trade, Policy and Programs in the Bureau of Economics, Energy and Business Affairs, William Craft reminded the audience of the importance of funding the sector. He emphasized that by investing in agriculture today, a choice is made to invest not only in the economic future, but in a powerful poverty reduction tool. Craft also stressed the critical importance of partnerships, investing in country-led plans; strengthening strategic coordination; leveraging the benefits of multilateral institutions and making a sustained and accountable commitment. Craft pointed out that the US government is committed to spend over US\$3 billion on agricultural development over the next three years, and that for the year 2010, President Barak Obama has asked Congress for more than US\$1 billion for agricultural development assistance worldwide, doubling the amount the US spent on agriculture in 2009.

In his summary remarks which focused on some considerations in designing national food security plans, specifically FAO’s, Brazil’s Zero Hunger program, FAO’s Director of the Liaison Office for North America, Dan Gustafson drew attention that the importance of political will and resources, recognizing the complexities of hunger and tying the pieces together all contributed to ensuring the success of the program and the way Brazil addresses national problems. According to Gustafson, between 2003-2008, poverty in Brazil declined by 27% and; extremely poor declined by 48% and between 1996-2006, there were dramatic declines in child malnutrition.

In his concluding remarks, Brathwaite put in perspective the hemispheric situation of poverty. He said, “This hemisphere has 800 million people, 200 million of which are in poverty. If each of us were to help to move one person out of poverty, this hemisphere would not only achieve the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 but we would eradicate hunger and poverty from our hemisphere.”

IICA focuses its attention to the upcoming Fifth Ministerial Conference to be held in Jamaica the week of October 25, 2009.

More information

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<http://www.iica.int/Eng/regiones/norte/USA/Pages/FoodSecurityConference.aspx>