

Mexican Víctor M. Villalobos takes office as Director General of IICA

- *The President of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, called for renewed faith in agriculture.*
- *The participants also paid tribute to the people of Haiti.*

San Jose, 15 January 2010 (IICA). The new Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Mexican Víctor M. Villalobos, was sworn in this morning at an official ceremony in Costa Rica.

The dignitaries taking part in the ceremony included the President of Costa Rica, Óscar Arias Sánchez; the Secretary General of the OAS, José Miguel Insulza, and the Chairman of the Inter-American Board of Agriculture (IABA) and Minister of Agriculture of Jamaica, Christopher Tufton.

Other senior government officials on hand included the Minister for the Presidency of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Arias, the ministers of agriculture of Costa Rica and Mexico, Javier Flores and Francisco Mayorga, respectively, and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Costa Rica, Edgar Ugalde.

Founded nearly seven decades ago, IICA has its Headquarters in Costa Rica and an Office in each of its 34 Member States. Its goal is to promote agriculture and rural development in the Americas.

The new Director General was elected by the hemisphere's ministers of agriculture, who met in Jamaica last October. He will head the Institute for four years (2010-2014), replacing Barbadian Chelston Brathwaite, who had been in charge of the specialized agency since 2002 and recently was granted the status of Director Emeritus of the organization.

Víctor M. Villalobos graduated as an agronomist from the National School of Agriculture in Chapingo, Mexico; obtained a master's degree in plant genetics from the Graduate School of the same academic center; and was awarded a Ph.D. in science from the University of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada. Until a few weeks ago, he was the Coordinator of International Affairs of his country's Secretariat of Agriculture.

Faith in agriculture

"An entire continent has come together today to renew its faith in agriculture as a vehicle for the prosperity and development of its peoples," declared President Arias.

The Costa Rican leader reiterated that, "we continue to believe in agriculture as a key activity for the survival of our species, we continue to believe in agriculture as a crucial activity for the reduction of poverty, and rural poverty in particular."

Mr. Insulza also stressed, "Greater investment in the agricultural sector is needed, because agriculture will continue to be one of the keys to poverty alleviation."

As his government's official representative, Mexico's Secretary of Agriculture, Francisco Madrigal said that, "in times of economic crisis, the nobility of agriculture becomes evident."

He added that, “While [Mexico’s] economy contracted by a little over seven percent during the last year, the sector grew by nearly two percent.”

The progress of agriculture “is essential to promote poverty reduction,” Mayorga emphasized.

In order to help build a period of understanding and prosperity for the rural sector in the Americas, the new IICA Director General said his administration would get under way with specific actions to strengthen trade, encourage rural development with a territorial approach, improve agricultural health and food safety, and promote respect for the environment.

“Help me help the countries,” Villalobos said. “Each one of you has a role to play and all of us must be real agents of knowledge and change, so that our contributions have an impact,” he added.

The Chairman of the Inter-American Board of Agriculture (IABA) and Minister of Agriculture of Jamaica, Christopher Tufton, said, “The world food crisis, combined with the global economic crisis, has given the agricultural sector an opportunity to claim its rightful place.”

“Institutions like IICA have a great obligation to help create a new model of technical assistance and offer cooperation for development,” Tufton went on.

“We still believe, and so we applaud and celebrate the swearing in of the new Director General,” the President of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, remarked.

Condolences for Haiti

After referring to the consequences of the earthquake that shook Haiti on 12 January, the participants in the swearing-in ceremony expressed their condolences to the Haitian people and observed a minute of silence.

“I am deeply saddened by the tragedy that has shaken Haiti, a people stricken by hurricanes and now by an earthquake. IICA and the OAS have programs there and we intend to do everything we can to help. Faced with this tragedy, it is up to us all to pull together,” said the Secretary General of the OAS, José Miguel Insulza.

In his speech, the new Director General of the Institute confirmed that, “helping the Haitian people will be my first task.”

“We had hoped that today would be a very happy day for all of us; unfortunately, the tragedy that has struck the people of Haiti saddens us deeply. We wish to express our deepest solidarity with that country at this time of great anguish,” Villalobos said.

The outgoing Director General, Chelston Brathwaite, confirmed that since the tragedy struck, “IICA has been supporting the efforts of the government and the people to rebuild Haiti.”

For more information, contact

patricia.leon@iica.int