

Crisis in food prices calls for writing a new chapter in the agrifood sector

IICA's most important annual in-house meeting, which will focus on the topic of food safety, got under way today.

San Jose, Costa Rica, October 24, 2008 (IICA). “Every once in a while, there is a moment in history that defines the future of a nation, a region or a discipline. Given the current situation, characterized by financial turbulence, climate change, rising food and oil prices and food insecurity, this is the moment to write a new chapter in the agrifood sector.”

With these words, the Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Chelston Brathwaite, welcomed the Institute's senior management staff, Representatives in the 34 Member States and Regional Specialists to “Representatives” Week,” and invited them to discuss how best to support the region in dealing with the crisis in food prices, and to identify those practices that will enable the Institute to collaborate in that effort.

Representatives' Week, which began today at IICA Headquarters in San Jose, Costa Rica, and will run through October 29, is the Institute's most important in-house meeting. It is held annually and involves more than 100 people from 34 countries.

During his opening remarks, the Director General stated that today's global challenges, including the crisis in food prices and food insecurity, will require long-term solutions since the causes of many are rooted in the past.

Those causes include less attention to and funding for the agricultural sector by governments and development banks over the last 25 years. Many governments have dismantled their agricultural extension services and have invested in rural areas, where forty per cent of the population lives, an average of only 6% of their national budgets.

Faced with this situation, some are calling for a new Green Revolution. Braithwaite advocates the adoption of a new model for development, one in which food security, a fundamental right of all people, is a key component of the national agenda, and policies for the modernization of agriculture and rural life are promoted.

He also called attention to the need to increase investment in the sector and to reform the ministries of agriculture, ensuring that they look after the interests of both food producers and consumers. He recommended, in addition, new policies on nutrition and food consumption, with a view to reducing dependence on imported products and using more of the products readily available in our countries.

Continuing, he called attention to the need for change in the curricula of the agricultural education system, which still view agriculture in terms of primary production, despite the fact that it accounts for only 5% of the economy. Today, it must focus on the expanded agricultural sector, which contributes up to 20% of the gross domestic product in some countries.

The Director General of the Tropical Agriculture Research and Higher Education Center (CAITIE), Jose Joaquin Campos, invited to address the meeting, agreed with Brathwaite as to the need to “change paradigms both at the local and global levels,” noting that the development of agriculture and natural resources in rural areas must be well thought out.

Julie Ann MacDonald, an expert with the World Food Program, also invited to speak, underscored the need to link short-term measures intended to assist those most vulnerable to the crisis with politically viable long-term solutions.

IICA’s Director of Trade and Policies, Julio Paz, who spoke on the policy framework for food security, recommended making improvements in agricultural research systems, increasing investment in rural infrastructure, promoting investment in agribusiness and developing instruments to reduce the risks of small-scale farmers.

During the first two days of the event, presentations by the Directors of Regional Operations and Integration will focus on the crisis and its repercussions for each region of the hemisphere. To conclude this first segment of Representatives’ Week, Director of Technical Leadership and Knowledge Management, James French, will sum up the strategies IICA must promote at the hemispheric, regional and national levels.

In pursuit of better Institute

In addition to discussing food security, and in light of the technical cooperation model implemented by the Institute under the Brathwaite administration, participants in the meeting will discuss those practices that have helped to improve the IICA’s performance and could be adopted throughout the Institute.

Their discussions will focus on corporate management, relations with strategic partners, securing resources, communications and institutional image and other topics.

Representatives’ Week will conclude on October 29 with the presentation of the Director General’s Awards for Excellence, honoring outstanding contributions by individuals and teams throughout the hemisphere.

More information

patricia.leon@iica.int