

President of Chile underscores the importance of agriculture for development and for eradicating hunger during visit to IICA Headquarters

The President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, visited IICA Headquarters during the Institute's most important internal meeting, known as "Representatives' Week".

San Jose, Costa Rica, 29 October 2008 (IICA). "Defending agriculture across the hemisphere and agricultural producers is a priority task, not only because our development as a hemisphere requires it, but also because of the contribution of agriculture in facing the challenge of hunger worldwide", said the President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, in a speech on Wednesday, 29 October, at the Headquarters of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), in Costa Rica.

The Head of State was welcomed by Director General, Chelston Brathwaite, who said that the President's visit was recognition that "agriculture is not only a way of life for millions of people in the Americas, but also it is a strategic sector that contributes to the economic, social, environmental and political development of the countries".

The visit coincided with the Institute's most important internal meeting, known as "Representatives' Week", which started on 23 October and concluded on Wednesday, 29 October. It provided an opportunity for President Bachelet to convey her message to IICA staff members from the 34 Member States.

On her arrival, Brathwaite welcomed her in his office. She was accompanied by the Minister of Economic Affairs of Chile, Hugo Lavados, the Ambassador of Chile in Costa Rica, Gonzalo Mendoza, as well as the heads of protocol of Chile and Costa Rica, Ambassadors Fernando Ayala and Rita Hernandez, respectively.

After briefly greeting Chilean staff members at IICA, the President addressed an audience of some 300 people on the issue of the challenges facing agriculture in a world in crisis. The audience included the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Livestock of Costa Rica, Carlos Villalobos, and the Director General of the Tropical Agriculture Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE), Jose Joaquín Campos. The ceremony was transmitted on the Web and could therefore be witnessed by the IICA Offices in the member countries.

President Bachelet spoke with conviction about her country's interest in "defending and promoting agriculture, because it is part of our identity". She said this was why a systematic effort had been made to modernize the agricultural sector, which included small- and medium-scale farmers in the country, all of which had resulted in the growth of production, employment and the generation of foreign exchange.

She then went on to urge all staff members of IICA and the 34 Representatives, in particular, to develop and promote techniques to improve agricultural performance in the countries. In her opinion, the current crisis in food prices brought with it opportunities for "a region where agriculture has enormous potential".

Here, she said, addressing the Director General of the Institute, “IICA has an enormously important responsibility, as it does also with regard to initiatives to protect natural resources and the environment”.

In the course of her presentation, she also addressed another subject --climate change and its impact on the reduction in biodiversity and on agrifood production systems in the countries. “Climate change will affect tropical and island countries more and will allow for increased production in the northern countries. This will bring about a redistribution of food production, which will benefit the rich countries”, she insisted.

In her opinion, it was imperative that measures be taken to mitigate the effects of climate change and, especially, to put a stop to deforestation, which, she recalled, accounted for 20% of carbon dioxide emissions, which were responsible for global warming.

The President referred to the worldwide financial crisis, which, she said, suggested the need for “an overhaul of the international financial system” and a new regulatory system to promote more transparency in financial agencies, to guarantee their solvency, curb greed and prevent the formation of financial bubbles.

The Director General of IICA said that Chile was a strategic ally in the area of horizontal cooperation. He noted the role that the Head of State had played in the context of the political, food, energy and financial crisis: “her leadership as a person, the leadership of her country, inspires us to look south to find a new direction”, Brathwaite said.

Michelle Bachelet’s visit to IICA was the last item on the agenda for her two-day visit to Costa Rica before she leaves for El Salvador to attend the Ibero-American Summit, to be held there from October 30-31.

Bachelet arrived in Costa Rica accompanied by a 25-member delegation, which included various senators, deputies, high government officials in the Chilean government and heads of government organizations, such as the Executive Director of the International Cooperation Agency. She was also accompanied by various business leaders.

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