



Agriculture in the Americas:

Innovate or Fail

by Víctor M. Villalobos
Photographs courtesy IICA

The Ministers of Agriculture of the Americas met recently in San José, Costa Rica and confirmed their commitment to innovation as the way to meet the enormous challenges facing the world—challenges like food security and climate change. They also affirmed that innovation is the way forward to achieving the development objective of having competitive, sustainable, and inclusive agriculture in our nations.

The 2011 Meeting of Ministers of Agriculture of the Americas was held under the slogan: “Sowing Innovation to Harvest Prosperity.” It was organized by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) along with the government of Costa Rica, through its Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and with the support of the Foreign Ministry.

Innovation was chosen as a topic because of a mandate from OAS member states. The 2010-2012 Strategic Plan for

IICA establishes the obligation to promote innovation in agriculture to make it more competitive and sustainable and to spread the benefits of agriculture to a greater number of people.

Innovation: A Driving Force

By innovation we mean the development and practice of new ideas to improve production; productivity; and social, economic, and environmental sustainability in agriculture.

We live in the Age of Innovation. Fast-moving technological changes and their almost immediate application are part of daily life today; so much so that it's not just the specialists who are working to keep up with the latest technology. Ordinary citizens have also incorporated many of these innovations into their daily lives, especially in terms of information and communications technology.

Innovation is associated with change, with the creation and management of opportunities. It is a transforming process that opens up new frontiers of possibilities for a country, for a production sector, a business, or a community. Innovation is also important for agriculture.

If we agree that innovation is a force that drives the long-term growth of countries, we will need to strengthen institutional frameworks to promote it. We will especially need to strengthen sectoral and national systems of innovation where the potential for transformation is the highest.

Each country's efforts and policies for promoting innovation will determine its likelihood of success in today's competitive and globalized world. These efforts can be supported by international technical cooperation, which will also make it possible to create regional and hemispheric systems of innovation.

Systems of innovation require a set of actors and interactions, but they also require laws and policies to support them. And to make them function, it is important to channel resources through public and private investment.

Innovation is the key to creating competitive, inclusive, and sustainable agriculture. It is also essential for meeting the current and future demands of different groups in society; finding new socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable forms of production; benefiting from global markets and strengthening local ones; ensuring food security for all people; lessening the contribution of agriculture to global warming; and adapting agriculture to new climate conditions.

Technological revolutions are constantly changing and modernizing agriculture, and the sector's performance is being measured in new ways. Today, agriculture requires a new technological and organizational revolution based on an innovative technological paradigm.

If we agree that countries reach new levels of wellbeing because of their capacity to innovate, we must say that agricultural systems are part of this process. IICA can play a fundamental role in catalyzing and strengthening innovative processes in agriculture.

IICA is the best ally of OAS member countries when it comes to agricultural and rural development with an innovative vision. It has an enormous potential because it has the dynamism and flexibility necessary to respond effectively and relevantly to member states' requests for support, and it has the infrastructure necessary for disseminating information about results achieved in innovation.

Multilateral governmental organizations like the IICA make it easier for countries to make use of public goods that are generated. The IICA can disseminate information widely and can facilitate a situation in which countries with more resources can support the innovation efforts of countries with limited resources.

The Hour of Agriculture

As Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, I have been emphasizing in different forums and in the visits that I make to our member countries that this is the moment for agriculture. We would be remiss if we did not transform this economic crisis into an opportunity.

After 2008, when the great recession began, world leaders began looking at the agricultural sector with new eyes. During the previous decade, agriculture had been wiped off the list of priorities for national development agencies and had become almost invisible.

Then, food prices reached unimagined levels and the increased volatility of prices, which continues today, began to affect all of us, but especially the poorest and most vulnerable among us who have to spend a

greater portion of their income purchasing food. At the same time, the population is growing. In less than 40 years, our planet will be inhabited by more than 9 billion human beings and we will have to produce 40–70 percent more food than we are producing today. That means we have to start “planting” that food now.

The world is also facing other considerable challenges: energy supply, financial instability, security, and environmental conservation, to mention just some of the most urgent issues. I am convinced that agriculture in the Americas can make a contribution in the search for solutions:

- While the agricultural frontier has been exhausted in some places, we still have land available in our hemisphere. With innovation, it will be possible to increase the efficiency of our yields.
- Innovation in agriculture can lead to processing certain crops to generate clean and sustainable energy without competing with food crops.
- Agriculture is sensitive to financial speculation, especially in terms of the prices for basic foods and agricultural inputs. We need more solid markets, better information, and more modern agricultural institutions and policies to meet this challenge.
- We must promote the creation of agribusinesses and strengthen production chains. At the same time, linking youth to agriculture through innovation can contribute to generating more job opportunities that make it possible to reduce poverty as well as internal and external migration.
- Agriculture is unfortunately one of the economic activities that produces the most greenhouse gasses. But it is also an ideal sector in which to apply new methodologies and technological improvements to help reduce these emissions and use resources sustainably. These are mitigation and adaptation measures that would benefit not only the agricultural sector, but also the whole world.



New Voices for Agriculture

For years, leaders in agriculture in our hemisphere have called for more attention to, and investment in, our sector. More attention is being directed at agriculture today, but this attention must still be translated into greater investment.

The crisis that began in 2008 led to a series of high-level political meetings on the food issue. In July 2009, the G8 industrialized countries, other nations, and world organizations met in the Italian city of L'Aquila for a Working Session on Food Security. In November 2009, the World Summit on Food Security gathered heads of state and government in Rome. And in June 2011, the G20 Ministers of Agriculture met in Paris, France.

Important recommendations were made at these meetings to increase research for agricultural innovation. But it is important to emphasize that there were also other meetings of the Ministers of Finance and the Presidents of the G20 Central Banks, one in Washington in April 2011 and another in Paris in June 2011. These leaders, who make decisions about the economies of the world's most powerful nations, recognized that food security is

critical for the international community and emphasized the need for long-term investment in agriculture in the developing countries. Welcome news indeed!

Another powerful voice has emerged from the private sector in favor of agriculture and agriculture's strategic role in the economy and in development. Bill Gates, one of the most influential men in the world and someone who made his fortune from technological innovation, recognized that investment in agriculture is two to four times more effective for reducing poverty and hunger than investment in any other sector!

In August of this year, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched its Agricultural Development Strategy. Its goal is to reduce hunger and poverty among millions of poor families in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and its approaches are perhaps not so different from those needed in Latin America and the Caribbean. To help poor families, the Gates decided to focus their investments in three strategic areas: research and development, agricultural policies, and access to markets. Considering the

urgencies of our nations, the IICA fully agrees with these priorities.

The multi-faceted crisis that humanity is experiencing today has created a new scenario and a new opportunity for agriculture. Let us take advantage of it and respond to the call the Ministers of Agriculture of the Americas are making to the heads of state and government, international financial and cooperation institutions, public institutions, and the private sector to increase investment and funding for innovative systems for agriculture in a robust and sustained way. ✿

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