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An Inter-American Aspiration

It was during the most critical years of World War II. Europe had lost its hegemony over vast areas of tropical Asia, and was at serious risk of losing others. In the face of such developments, it became necessary to look elsewhere for strategic crops such as rubber (latex), certain fibers, medicinal plants, rice, tea, tropical oilseeds and plants used to produce insecticides, such as rotenone.

The moment was right to realize a dream that had been nurtured since 1910. The Americas were a valid alternative for fostering the development of tropical crops and stock raising, for which it would be necessary to establish research and education systems to address the region’s needs.

The efforts to create an institute that would seek to solve the region’s problems and foster mutual understanding among the leaders of agriculture got under way at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, when the Pan-American Union –now the Organization of American States (OAS)– undertook the important task of promoting agricultural development.

The Institute is founded and takes its first steps

The Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences (IICA) was founded in 1942, thanks to the vision of people like Henry Wallace, then the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, and Ernesto Molestina, Director General of Agriculture of Ecuador. It was Wallace’s idea to create IICA and Molestina who presented the respective resolution. The Institute’s headquarters were established in Turrialba, Costa Rica, a region strategically situated between South and North America, with characteristics typical of agriculture in the Americas.

The first IICA field office (which subsequently became the Center for Education and Research) was officially inaugurated in 1943, at a ceremony attended by the President of Costa Rica, Rafael Angel Calderon Guardia, and the Vice President of the United States of America, Henry A. Wallace.

They were accompanied by the Minister of Agriculture of Costa Rica, Mariano Montealegre, and the first Director General of IICA, Earl N. Bressman.

The high caliber of IICA’s scientific and academic activities paved the way for its subsequent expansion. In 1944, the first multilateral Convention on IICA was signed, under which its legal status was recognized by different governments in the hemisphere.

The growth of the Institute

When the OAS was created in 1948, IICA became the specialized agency for agriculture of the Inter-American System, consolidating its work by extending its action to every country in the hemisphere. (This task was completed in the 1990s, when Bahamas joined as a member.)

By 1964, 21 Member States of the OAS has joined IICA.

During the 1970s, IICA carried out a number of specialized multinational programs as part of its strategy of hemispheric and humanist projection. In this period, specific, direct research and education activities were separated from those of a more general nature. This separation was achieved with the establishment of the Tropical Agriculture Research and Education Center (CAATE), in 1973, under the CATIE Contract between the Government of Costa Rica and IICA, which was approved by all the member countries.

A new Convention on IICA was adopted in 1979, redefining the Institute’s objectives, adjusting its cooperation actions with the member countries, and creating the Inter-American Board of Agriculture (SABA) as its new governing body. The organization was also renamed, becoming the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture. By that time, membership had climbed to 29 Member States.

IICA assumed a leading role in agricultural development and integration in the western hemisphere. The Institute’s advocacy of the need for agricultural modernization won support in Latin America and the Caribbean, against a backdrop of sweeping transformations in international economic policies.

During the 1980s, the Institute coordinated the process of drawing up a hemispheric plan designed to reactivate the agricultural sector. This became known as PLANLAC, the Plan of Joint Action for Agricultural Reactivation in Latin America and the Caribbean. This proposal centered on the modernization of agriculture and initially included a broad portfolio of hemispheric and subregional projects.
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