

TACKLING THE LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH IN THE AMERICAS: LAUNCH OF THE INTER-AMERICAN TASK FORCE ON NCDs

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**Dr. Miguel Garcia Winder, Representative in the United States
Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture**

Question 1: The agricultural sector has an important role to play in promoting healthy nutrition and in obesity prevention. How can IICA specifically support the work of the Task Force?

First of all, thank you for the invitation to be here. I am very honored to be here, not only in my own capacity, but also to represent the work of IICA.

Allow me to start with three things to try to understand how IICA can contribute to this Task Force.

The first thing I want to highlight is IICA's mission. I think everybody here recognizes us as the institution devoted to agriculture, but our mandate and our mission has other mandates. It is not only to increase the competitiveness of agriculture, but also to improve the rural well-being; and we were given a very clear mandate to work in rural areas at all levels, not only on the productive but also on the social and inclusive side.

The second thing that I think is very important to understand, is what is the concept of agriculture. For many of us, agriculture is thinking of the people in the fields, in the best of cases we might think of tractors and corn, and that is probably our concept of agriculture. But the reality is that agriculture is still the backbone of many economies; even in the United States we consider the economic contribution of agriculture goes from 2% to 11% when we look at the change that agriculture develops. So agriculture crosses much more than production, it goes into the feeding, it goes onto the table, and it goes into the type of foods.

Thirdly, I think the problem of diseases needs to be seen in a much wider context of nutritional and food security. And if we think of nutrition and food security we cannot only think about the quantity of food, but also the availability of food, the consistency of supply, the composition of the diet, and the use of the diet. So if we consider this problem then IICA has a central role to play, at least in one issue: integration of value chains.

If we are to work to create policies, instruments and knowledge to help integrate the value chains then that will have an impact on the supply side, it will have an impact on the demand side, and it will have an impact on income. And in doing these three things, I think we will have an important contribution to the solution of noncommunicable diseases. For example, on the supply side we need to work on production, we need to become more effective in production and the systems of production to become more environmentally friendly and friendly with human health. In the case of the demand side, we need

to work on markets, market transparency and efficiency, in such a way that people in the rural areas and cities might have access to the best quality foods.

So in looking at this, IICA has an important role to play in the integration of all these value chains; and in doing so we also see a role based on science. I think we have to be careful in making assumptions about all these things, unless we are science-based. It is very difficult to have a discussion unless among all the actors unless we have a common understanding, and that common understanding needs to be science, and science-based knowledge. So the way that we see IICA contributing to this will be in policy, innovation and technology, capacity building, and integration of values chains that start in the most rural areas and end on the tables in Washington DC or New York or our cities; because in the end, that is what we will eat. What we will eat tonight, which hopefully will be vegetables and fruits, requires new production systems, efficient transportation, efficient markets, and efficient production, and that cannot be achieved in the agricultural sector alone, to my knowledge.

Question 2: I noticed that you mentioned the words “innovation and technology” when you answered the first question, what about it?

I think innovation and technology have a tremendous role for the future. First of all, we have to work with current crops. All of these crops that are causing problems, we need to find ways to improve them, find ways to make them healthier, find new technologies to produce fruits and vegetables and to, sorry to bring up this issue, adapt to climate change, which will total change the way we eat in the next 20 years.

Second, there are hundreds of “sub-utilized crops”; crops that have been used in the past but for which we know very little. If we look at a basic food basket, it is probably six to twelve major crops and animals, but there are other crops and animals that have been sub-utilized. So there is a lot of work we can do there. And you have one example, quinoa. Quinoa was nearly forgotten and suddenly it became trendy, nice and healthy. Now you cannot find quinoa in Peru, at all. And we can talk about fava beans, or small rats in the Andean and Mexican regions. So there is a lot of science and technology.

We also created a lot of products that were high in starch when there were new technologies, we can now reverse that with new technologies, and the production sector will be critical in doing that. Even, tobacco; tobacco is a product that is very rich in pharmaceuticals, and important for the future and important for poverty reduction and health. Nicotine, in many uses, is important, and tobacco has nicotine. So innovation is critical, and goes from the use of current products to the use of the products to find uses for these products that are going to be displaced. And unless we understand that that is a system then we won't achieve the solution we want. So I am a firm believer in innovation and technology, and that it is the only thing that will take us to the future. Just remember, corn was this big (small size) but now corn has a big place in this world.

Thank you.