

Interview with Pedro Ferreira

Director of CATIE: Tropical Agriculture Research and Higher Education Center in Costa Rica.

Henry A. Wallace's support of Latin American agriculture led to the formation of CATIE.

Interviewed by Jack Shepard on September 30, 2003 in Washington D.C.

Q: I wanted to start out with you telling me briefly what CATIE is.

Ferreira: Well, CATIE is a tropical research and higher education institution, one that has very strong outreach activities. So, we are running a number of projects in the countries where we work and with thousands of families and farmers in the field. So, it's not only a university, as you know, a normal university. It's a research center but with roots in the fields and work with many, many countries and many, many farmers.

Q: Can you name some of those countries for me?

Ferreira: Member countries are Mexico, all Central America, The Dominican Republic, Columbia, Venezuela, Paraguay and Bolivia - regular members. And we do have also one affiliated member which is Spain right now. In the future we hope to cover the rest of tropical America.

Q: You said this is an educational institution. You're granting graduate degrees, is that correct?

Ferreira: Exactly. This is the first graduate school in Latin America for agriculture and natural resources. We train about 5,000 people per year in different short events for up to three month courses. We do also have formal graduate education programs. We have five math and science programs, and we have Ph.D. programs. We have a joint diploma with the University of Idaho in the United States, and we have a joint diploma with University of Wales in the United Kingdom. We also have exchange doctor agreements with Purdue University and Yale University in the USA.

Q: Many activities going on and many agricultural fingers in the pie...where do these folks go once they receive their degrees? How do they affect the economic and agricultural status quos in these countries?

Ferreira: Since we are working with a huge number of outreach projects in the field and we are dealing with about 15-20,000 farmers at present in different projects, we have a good idea what is going on in the Americas. Most of our students go back to their countries to write the thesis in a problem that is of significance for their own country. Most of our students go back to their own nations to work. They engage in different options with the public sector or with the private sector. The NGO sector is also a source of work.

Q: Do they take on leadership positions in government or in agricultural businesses?

Ferreira: Yes, of course. The graduate school started in 1946 so that's about 50 years or 60 right now, although CATIE has only 30 years of existence. Our mother institute was InterAmerican Institute for Agricultural Sciences created under the leadership of Henry Wallace. And the program has created, I believe the first graduate professionals of our tropical America and many of them were ministers or head of companies, presidents, vice presidents, etc. The impact of CATIE and IICA has been tremendous. At present we have two ministers in Latin America who

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were former students in Latin America that are former students of our institute. The minister of agriculture in Argentina and the minister of environment in Honduras, are part of our alumnae.

Q: What was Henry Wallace's contact with CATIE? What was his important role as far as CATIE is concerned?

Ferreira: In the early '40s and even in the late '30s there were discussions related to tropical agriculture and agriculture in general in the Department of Agriculture of the USA and in different ministries in Latin America. And the idea was brought that the importance of tropical agriculture and the importance of creating a knowledge about how to manage tropical agriculture, the countries have a good knowledge of how to handle temperate agriculture. But tropical agriculture still needs work and by that time Henry Wallace was well aware of the difficulties. And it's amazing.

He was saying in bananas and plantains we should be focusing on black segatoca which is a fungus. In Cacao he knew very well that we should focus on Monilia or the witch's broom which are funguses. Even today those are challenges, and those are priorities of our research agenda. So, he was really ahead of time. He really knew in detail what were the challenges. It's amazing that in the early '40s he was forecasting and planning our present today, 60 years afterwards.

Q: He's had a tremendous effect on the United States Department of Agriculture policy also since the New Deal years. He was a visionary.

Ferreira: He was also a man of knowledge. He was not just a dreamer. He was a man of knowledge. He knew what he was saying and what he was proposing and in detail. He was also a scientist and a researcher. His influence was in part due to this in-depth knowledge that he had of agriculture.

Q: Just before he became vice president of the United States he was sent to Mexico to take part in the inauguration of Mexico's new president. He noticed the depressed state of Mexican agriculture, the poor yields that they were getting from their corn crops. From that came agricultural experiment stations in Mexico that were funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. And it seems that a similar thing has happened in other parts of Latin America because of Wallace's influence. What would you say has been the overall impact of that influence?

Ferreira: Well, again, I believe that Henry Wallace's interest in hybrid corn, for example, and Wallace's interest in creating experiment stations not only in Latin America because I believe that his contacts with the Rockefeller and Ford Foundation laid out the ground to the creation of what we call today the international centers for agricultural research. And in particular in Mexico we have the international maize and wheat breeding center. And those centers were very influential in what is known as the Green Revolution under the leadership of Norman Borlaug, an American scientist and Iowa citizen. And I believe that Henry Wallace was really very, very influential in this particular aspect of our history. The Green Revolution really saved millions of lives in the world and I believe that one of the main things of the Green Revolution was the use of hybrids. The Green Revolution was fundamental in terms of saving lives of people and coping

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with poverty around the world. And Henry Wallace was one, I believe one of the people, one of the persons that most influenced the start of this revolution.

I believe, because what Henry Wallace started in the early 40's was the idea of creating an international institute for tropical agriculture. In the beginning the name of the institute was IICA, Inter-American Institute for Agricultural Sciences. Afterwards, the Institute, together with the government of Costa Rica created CATIE, the present center for tropical agriculture. And I believe that this was the start of a revolution, yes, in terms, first of all, of educating the leaders of our agricultural sector in Latin America. As we said before, many of the alumni were afterwards ministers or heads of companies, etc. But also I believe that the networking, the fostering of research, the fostering of better policies were crucial for the Americas. Of course, right now, you have many good national institutes and you have very good universities in Latin America, but the Institute, still today, CATIE and IICA both play a very important role in terms of networking, in terms of knowledge sharing, in terms of tackling strategic issues that are needed in terms of technology, in terms of research and even in terms of learning about our rural poverty that still needs a lot of work and a lot of support.

Q: When you visit a country like Argentina or in your country of Costa Rica and other Latin American countries, do you see the effects of Henry Wallace's influence?

Ferreira: For example, the IICA, the InterAmerican Institute for Corporation and Agriculture which was created originally as the InterAmerican Institute for Agricultural Sciences by Henry Wallace, is the leading institute in agriculture and the big umbrella under which all the ministers and all the efforts of the countries are done in terms of agriculture. And the creation of that institute was an idea that came out of Henry Wallace. CATIE is also working in terms of corporation and research corporation and of course we also have a very important role.

Q: I'm sure that there has been some progress in alleviating the poverty and improving the nutritional level of the general population in countries in Latin America and in other third world countries around the world – countries that we can say that Wallace has got some credit, we can give Wallace some credit for having improved? May we say that?

Ferreira: There are many different examples of very, very successful institutions and projects that have improved productivity and have improved organization, campesino (farmer) organization. And I believe that this is the work of IICA, it is the work of CATIE and this is the result of the Wallace initiative, of course.

Q: Why do you think Henry Wallace was interested in agriculture in Latin America?

Ferreira: I believe that he was well aware in a time of war in the early 40's that there were blocks around the world, and that the block that is closer to the USA was Latin America and North America and Mexico. So, even though President Roosevelt was pushing him to visit Russia, he decided to visit Latin America. And again he was ahead of time because even today we are now discussing a treaty for free commerce, free trade in the Americas and he was talking

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of this 60 years ago. So, he was, again, ahead of time and he was well aware of the importance of Latin America and the hemispheric block that we do form.

Q: Well, he would visit countries in Latin America and he would speak Spanish to the crowds that were gathered to hear him. What kind of an impact do you think that had on the people that were listening to him, an American leader who is not, Americans are not known for their multilingual proficiency and here is the Vice President of the United States who understood agriculture and also understood the language and could present his ideas in the language of the people. How important do you think that was to those that were listening?

Ferreira: I think it was tremendous, the impact of the visits of Henry Wallace to Latin America were tremendous and you know, even his adversaries in the USA, after looking at the results of Henry Wallace's visits, were astonished and amazed of the results. I think that was not only the way he addressed the people in Spanish, using the Spanish language but also his ways and means to address people and to approach people. You know, the humble way of approaching the farmer or the families, that was Henry Wallace, he was an amazing person.

I believe that the initial relationship between poverty and violence, and I believe that Wallace knew that very well. When you improve the lives of, the livelihood of people then you have better ground to talk about democracy and to talk about pan-Americanism, etc. And I believe that this is what Henry Wallace was thinking. He thought that having a good deal with Latin America and treating the countries as brother countries was the way to create a better environment to work together, in particular, in very hard times that were those times of the war in which the USA needed support. And, in fact, the visit of Wallace to Latin America secured the support of many of the countries that, in fact, declared war on Germany. So, I believe that his thinking was right and his acts were correct.

Q: And, of course, there were many natural resources that were found, or are found, in Latin American countries that were important to the war effort too.

Ferreira: That's also important but rather it was a concern and I believe that this was one of the concerns of Henry Wallace also and one of the, you know, one of the important things that led to the creation of CATIE and IICA, crucial crops, strategic crops for the war was one of the concerns. Of course, research takes time, rural developmental agriculture takes time and I don't think that we have influenced it a lot - the result of the war. CATIE and IICA's impact is an impact over time.

Q: Can you explain to me the difference and the importance of agriculture, maybe not the importance because agriculture is important everywhere, but the way it's viewed by the general public, population and the countries in a country where there is a lot of poverty, in what we call a third world country?

Ferreira: Well, the importance of agriculture in our countries is tremendous particularly because we have very little industry and in particular because the lives of people depend on agriculture.

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And you can see this very easily. For example, in the last two or three years in Central America there was a drought, little rain and thousands of farmers died because of hunger. So, even today when you have difficulties in agriculture people die. So, it's a different world and of course, the solution is a solution which we can all contribute. But the dependence on agriculture is tremendous, even in the gross domestic product of our countries; in particular, for example, you take a poor country like Honduras. I believe that the gross domestic product or the percentage of agriculture is about 40% if you add raw products and industrial products coming out of agriculture. It's a tremendous percentage. I don't think that in the USA you have more than five percent or three percent but in a country like Honduras it's maybe 40, maybe 50% of the economy, so agriculture is tremendous. But, on the other hand, in terms of social importance it is even higher because maybe 90% of the population depends on agriculture. So, imagine the impact of having a good agricultural extension service, the impact of having good agricultural policies, the impact of having good education and training in agriculture is tremendous.

Q: Is that what drives CATIE and IICA?

Ferreira: Exactly, that's the truth.

Q: If Henry Wallace were alive today, how do you think he would feel about CATIE and IICA and the work that they're doing?

Ferreira: Well, I believe that he would be proud of our institutes and our accomplishments and the way in which we are handling things. In particular, I believe that these are two remarkable institutes. I would talk about CATIE because I am the director of CATIE. It is an institute that is working with very little money from the countries; it's almost a private institution in terms of funding. We are very competitive and we get different funding from different sources, multilateral, bilateral competitions, etc. And we are working in thirteen countries, fourteen countries in Latin America touching the lives of 20,000, 10,000 families each year, training 5000 persons in our training program each year. And this is accomplished with very little core, basic money. So, it's a very efficient institution and it's an institution that truly believes in what it is doing and I believe that most of our managers are well aware of their responsibility, that's very important. And we are also training a huge number of young people, young scientists, leaders and this is important because you are paving the ground for a revolution, a revolution in agriculture, the one that Henry Wallace was dreaming 60 years ago.