

Welcome to the General Secretariat of SICA, a meeting point for all Central Americans, and whose doors are always open to receive you and accompany you in your work in favour of Central American integration.

The agenda of our integration process is ever expanding as it incorporates new issues, but we also need to advance and deepen those that were already a priority in the region. Such is the case of the negotiation for an association agreement with the European Union, which makes it urgent that we perfect the customs union and strengthen our capacity for management and administration of international cooperation through its harmonization and alignment, as well as give greater certainty and unity to our vision of international relations, thereby increasing our capacity for political negotiation on a global basis.

At the General Secretariat, integration is conceived as the search for economic, political, social, environmental and cultural unity among the countries of SICA to build together Central America as a region of peace, freedom, democracy and development. To this end, we have worked hard on interinstitutional coordination and heeded the mandate of the Presidents at the Summit in December 2004 to reactivate the Secretariats Committee and develop a work program together. Thus, in 2005, after a long recess of the Secretariats Commission, we convened a first meeting in this new phase of the Commission, with the participation of almost all the secretariats of the system and as a result of which we began formulating the first joint work plan with the support and participation of each and every one of the secretariats. Subsequently, we conducted joint visits to the governments of Belize, Honduras and the Dominican Republic and participated with a large representation of the Commission at the Summit of Vienna to discuss the issue of harmonization and alignment of international cooperation. Then, in the month of May 2006, we travelled to the city of Zaragoza with seven secretariats of the system to see to the water issue in the face of the 2008 World Meeting to be held in Zaragoza.

Just recently, we visited Chile to participate in an event organized by the Foreign Ministry of the government of that country and the Central American ambassadors accredited in it, as well as to attend a forum at headquarters of ECLAC. We also convened a meeting of all the Secretariats and regional institutions and organizations that comprise the whole of the Central American institutionality, with the participation of about 36 institutions. Similarly, we had a meeting with regional organizations of the private sector. At these meetings, we shared the most relevant information on the work of SICA, the most topical issues and, above all, the vision of the future of regional integration with the purpose of enhancing the coherence and complementarity of institutional work.

Likewise, we heard the views and comments of each institution, both on matters falling within their competence and global aspects of the process, which allowed us to know not only the strengths and achievements, but also the areas in which capabilities can and should be improved through the joint participation of two or more institutions in order to obtain the best results from their management. That's why this meeting is very important for the General Secretariat of SICA. The establishment of an Interministerial Technical Committee whose purpose is the formulation of an Agro-environmental Regional Strategy with the participation of the agriculture, environment and health sectors and the involvement of three secretariats of the System, coincides fully with our efforts to develop one of our principal endeavours, and is a clear confirmation that together we can build a genuinely Central American region.

I have no doubt that you'll make an invaluable contribution to Central American integration. Agriculture, health and environment are key sectors to our region. Giving unity to the progress made by the Central American Agricultural Policy, the Environmental Plan for the Central American Region and the different regional programs and projects in health, is a true way to do integration. I totally agree with you when you say that "the agreement for the formulation of the strategy from several points of view reflects a qualitative leap in intersectoral relations in the context of the process of Central American integration. The decision reflects a greater maturity of intersectoral relations, and demonstrates the usefulness of the preceding process and the intent of strengthening it."

I can only congratulate you and wish you every success in this conference, and tell you that you have the full support of the General Secretariat. We are ready to unreservedly accompany you in your work. Furthermore, I am encouraged to confirm that in order to face the challenges inherent in the process of regional integration we have an institutional framework and committed and capable organizations that are fully identified with the vision and deep-felt longing for a united Central America.

Once again, welcome and make yourselves at home. Thank you very much.