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### “Doing the bright thing,” for Canada and the world

*Jean Lebel*

*IDRC’s President reflects on a recent trip to Chile and Colombia as part of the delegation accompanying the Governor General of Canada*

No country can confront the tremendous challenges of today’s world on its own. But nor should it. A recent trip to Latin America brought home to me just how much Canada has to offer, and gain from, international collaborations aimed at tackling global challenges and achieving shared goals.

I recently travelled to Chile and Colombia as part of a delegation accompanying His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, and Her Excellency Sharon Johnston. Fellow delegates included two members of Parliament and leaders from Canada’s education, science, and business sectors. We came along to share our organizations’ best ideas, but also to listen and learn.

In an address to university faculty from across Santiago, His Excellency spoke of what he calls “the diplomacy of knowledge,” where people and institutions come together across borders and disciplines to improve the human condition.

“This kind of exchange is critical to progress in today’s world,” he said. “And there is no excuse not to pursue collaboration.”

#### Helping Canada stay connected

This message resonates powerfully with IDRC, whose support for research and innovation has helped Canada stay connected to developments beyond its borders for almost 45 years.

A Memorandum of Understanding signed in Santiago on December 1 is an excellent case in point. Canada’s Science, Technology and Innovation Council (STIC) and Chile’s National Innovation Council for Competitiveness (CNIC) have committed to fostering the capabilities of advisory councils that help governments promote economic growth and social development.



Along with IDRC, these two national innovation councils will collaborate on setting up the first platform for international cooperation in this area. A meeting in September 2015 will launch the process of helping innovation councils from developing countries make their own science and technology research more digestible, and useful, for decision-makers.

This initiative speaks to the global outlook of both Chile and Canada. It also draws on a strong bond forged decades ago when IDRC funded social science research in Chile during the 17-year dictatorship.

#### “Keeping ideas alive” in Chile

Appreciation for that support continues to generate interesting connections for Canada. I was reminded of this in Santiago when I met Sergio Bitar, a leading public intellectual who served in three Chilean administrations, as minister of mining, education, and public works.

After the 1973 coup, Bitar was imprisoned for a year before being forced into exile for a decade. He later served in the government of Ricardo Lagos, a recipient of IDRC grants during the dark years who has credited IDRC with helping to “keep ideas alive” in Chile.



Bitar told me about fascinating interviews he has conducted with former heads of state who were instrumental over the past 30 years in democratic transitions in nine countries. In a forthcoming publication, these change-makers reflect on their diverse experiences and distill lessons for future transitions. We look forward to hosting the Ottawa launch of this important book at IDRC next year.

### **Supporting Colombia’s peace process**

This was my first visit to Colombia, a resource-rich country with a long tradition of top-notch research, now struggling to emerge from 50 years of damaging conflict. IDRC has long funded research that supports Colombia’s closely linked efforts to secure a lasting peace and maximize incomes and well-being in impoverished rural areas.

One current Canadian-funded food security initiative is helping to fight poverty and malnutrition in the southwestern Nariño region. Canadian and Colombian researchers have developed high-yielding varieties of potatoes that contain twice as much protein and more iron and zinc than native varieties.

These new varieties are also more resistant to the devastating “late blight” that can so easily wipe out a crop. Communities are already seeing less malnutrition and stunting among their children, and farmers’ profits have increased by 18%.

### **Benefits for both countries**

I had the pleasure of presenting these encouraging results to Their Excellencies and to Colombia’s Deputy Minister of Agriculture Aníbal Fernández de Soto and the Honourable Michelle Rempel, Canada’s Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification.

Minister Rempel was interested to learn that the technologies developed in this project are now also being applied in Canada. They are helping to protect small cereal grains from Fusarium head blight, a fungal disease that has cost this country’s wheat growers \$1.5 billion in lost income since the 1990s.



Other researchers with IDRC connections are deeply engaged in the Colombian government’s ambitious rural development program, Misión Rural, which is led by former IDRC grantee José Ocampo. The Misión is tasked with creating a policy road map for the Colombian countryside that is seen as critical to the success of the peace process.

President Juan Manuel Santos has invited two international experts to join the Board of Misión Rural and both have ties to IDRC: Julio Berdegué, principal researcher at the IDRC-funded Latin American Center for Rural Development (RIMISP), and Albert Berry, the renowned University of Toronto professor emeritus of economics.

### **Medellín’s transformation**

In the face of enormous challenges, Colombia is also making impressive strides to improve the quality of life for city dwellers. I was surprised by what I saw in Medellín. The former “murder capital of the world” has recently won international acclaim for bold urban planning that is helping to reduce social exclusion, crime, and poverty.



In addition to new libraries, schools, and parks, residents of the slums built on Medellín’s steep slopes now enjoy fast links to the city centre thanks to an efficient cable car system. Trips that once took an hour or two of arduous climbing are now only a few minutes, giving Medellín’s most disadvantaged citizens easy access to the city’s economic core.

Colombia’s second-largest city has become an inspiring case study in the wisdom of investing in the poorest parts of town. Last year, Medellín was named the world’s most innovative city in an online contest launched by Citi, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the Urban Land Institute. Earlier this year, 22,000 government, business, and civil society leaders gathered there for the World Urban Forum and put equity at the heart of a new agenda for all cities.

## “Smarter, more caring nation”

Smart policies based on equity are key tools for improving lives and livelihoods. The Governor General of Canada knows this, having dedicated his mandate to building “a smarter, more caring nation and a fairer, more just world.”

In Medellín, at the National University of Antioquia’s Faculty of Mines, His Excellency spoke about a sustainable approach to resource development that balances the needs of a prosperous economy with those of a healthy environment. “This is not just a matter of doing the right thing, but also the bright thing,” he said.

Elsewhere on our trip, he extolled “partnerships between peoples of the very best kind” that are the hallmarks of Canadian collaborations with Chile and Colombia. At IDRC, we are proud to be an integral part of those efforts as we pursue our mission of building knowledge that spurs innovation and finds solutions.



RIDEAU HALL | SGT RONALD DUCHESNE

His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston and Her Excellency Sharon Johnston (centre) with members of the official and accompanying delegations in Santiago on November 30, 2014. Jean Lebel is seventh from left.

Other photos (from top right):

RIDEAU HALL | SGT RONALD DUCHESNE

Seated (from left): STIC Chair Howard Alper, Jean Lebel, David Johnston, Her Excellency Michelle Bachelet, President of Chile, and CNIC President Gonzalo Rivas Gómez

MINISTERIO DE OBRAS PUBLICAS, CHILE

Sergio Bitar with President Michelle Bachelet in 2009, when he was Minister of Public Works in her first administration

RIDEAU HALL | SGT RONALD DUCHESNE

Jean Lebel (right) presents the Colombia food security project to Their Excellencies, along with (beside Lebel) the Honourable Michelle Rempel and Colombia’s Deputy Minister of Agriculture Aníbal Fernández de Soto

DEUTSCHE WELLE | PATRICK BENNING

One of three Metrocable lines that connect to Medellín’s urban rail system

## Learn more

- [Canada, Chile commit to boosting global knowledge economy](#)
- [Governor General views Canadian-funded rural development efforts in Colombia](#)
- [Keeping ideas alive in Chile](#)
- [Land holds promise of peace in Colombia](#)
- [New potato varieties fight poverty and malnutrition in Colombia \(PDF, 2.7 MB, English or Spanish\)](#)
- [IDRC Country profiles: Chile | Colombia](#)
- [\[VIDEO\] Jean Lebel talks about the Memorandum of Understanding \(1:00-1:23\)](#)
- [\[VIDEO\] Jean Lebel describes the Colombia food security project \(2:40-4:09\)](#)

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