

For Immediate Release



AUB guest lecturer and World Bank consultant: Food security impacts poverty and politics and is one of the causes of Arab Spring

Lebanese government is changing its strategy to increase local production and reduce imports

Beirut, Lebanon- 01/12/2011 – Lebanon’s heavy dependence on imported food combined with massive hikes in global food prices in 2007-08 have sparked increases in poverty as well as spurred a shift in government economic strategies, said a consultant to the World Bank and FAO during a lecture held at AUB on November 30, 2011.

Jane Harrigan, a political economist and a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, said that the average Lebanese household spends 20-30 percent of their take-home pay on food. So with the 15 percent increase in food prices and nearly 30 percent of the population living below the upper poverty line, there has been an increase in poverty in Lebanon over the past few years.

Harrigan’s presentation entitled, “The Economics of Food Security in Lebanon” was sponsored by the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) at AUB and is part of a lecture series that will act as a prelude to the establishment of degree and non-degree programs in food security at FAFS.

“Yes, domestic wheat production has increased significantly over the last fifteen years but so has domestic demand due to population growth, income growth, and changing consumption patterns,” warned Harrigan, who has authored several books on aid and power in the Arab world and contributed to dozens others on food security and political and developmental economy.

In 2009, the World Bank rated Lebanon as vulnerable in food security. The global rise in food prices and the fact that Lebanon is heavily dependent on import had some serious macro-economic effects: it led to inflation, a rising agricultural trade deficit, and a major negative social effect. During 2007-08, the agriculture trade deficit as well as the cost of imported food increased 50 percent.

Despite government efforts to increase wheat and cereal production through the years, Lebanon has continued to rely on imports for around 80-90 percent of its domestic wheat supplies. However, in response to the sharp rise in imported food costs, the Ministry of Agriculture now wants to move from producing 15-20 percent of cereal requirements, to produce 30-40 percent, doubling the country’s domestic production. Moreover, the

government will in general move towards a strategy that gives greater priority to domestic production, moving away from imports.

Trade data suggests that Lebanon has a very strong revealed comparative advantage in the export of fruit and vegetables as well as wine and tobacco, added Harrigan.

From a purely economic perspective, if Lebanon wants to achieve food security by specializing in those areas where it has an international comparative advantage it should be focusing on exporting fruits vegetables and importing cereals that it doesn't have a comparative advantage in.

The government needs to promote the agriculture sector, using foreign currency earned from exporting to import the wheat and barley, said the SOAS professor

According to Harrigan, a proposed plan has already passed by cabinet to increase the local production of cereals rather than relying on imports.

Harrigan argued that countries in the MENA region have adopted food sovereignty, granting governments more power and control over their food supplies.

She added that food security strategy, including advice on it by bodies such as the World Bank and FAO, cannot be looked at from a purely economic perspective; it should factor in political implications.

The global food crisis is one of the many propellers of the Arab Spring, Harrigan added, before unveiling her latest project, funded by Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar, on food sovereignty in the MENA region.

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Note to Editors

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