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AUB and UNIDO: Empowering Lebanon's Transition to a Circular Economy

In a significant stride towards advancing sustainable practices in Lebanon's food industry, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the American University of Beirut (AUB) embarked on a pioneering collaboration, marked by the launch of the Private Sector Transition to Green and Circular Economy in Lebanon project. This underscores a shared commitment to fostering resource efficiency, cleaner production, and ultimately, a circular economy in Lebanon. With the backing of key stakeholders, including national ministries, industry associations, and academic institutions, this initiative promises to be a cornerstone in Lebanon's journey towards sustainable development.

Background

In December 2023, UNIDO signed a contract with the Office of Business Development at AUB, for the provision of training and technical assistance services aimed at advancing sustainable practices within Lebanon's food industry. Central to this effort is the application of UNIDO's methodology for the Transfer of Environmentally Sound Technologies (TEST), a systematic approach to identifying and exploiting the most feasible opportunities for resource efficiency and continuous improvement in using materials, water, and energy within an industrial company. This set the stage for the project to kick off its first phase at AUB's Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (MSFEA) on January 15, 2024. The first phase is set to conclude by October 2024 and two more phases are anticipated in 2025.

The project is spearheaded by Professor Antoine Ghauch from the Chemistry Department at AUB; with the support of AUB Provost Zaher Dawy; MSFEA Dean Alan Shihadeh; Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) Dean Fares El Dahdah; and MSFEA Associate Dean Riad Chedid, director of the Institute at MSFEA.

Since 2014, UNIDO has championed the introduction of resource efficiency and cleaner production (RECP) concepts in various countries, including Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, as part of the regional EU funded SwitchMed Program aimed at fostering sustainable consumption and production practices in the south Mediterranean region. Under the SwitchMed MED TEST program, UNIDO has championed the Green Industry concept to

address sustainable industrial development within the framework of global sustainable development challenges.

In Lebanon, the SwitchMed MED TEST program (2014-2024) identified 257 resource efficiency and cleaner production (RECP) measures in 23 industrial companies from various industrial sectors ranging from food and beverages, to chemicals, plastic, and printing. The identified measures resulted in average energy savings of 30 percent, water savings of 22 percent, and materials savings of 1 percent, leading to economic savings of €4.86 million per year with a payback period of just 1.4 years. Additionally, the resource efficiency improvement measures would allow the companies to lower their environmental footprint by reducing CO2 equivalent emissions by around 13,000 tons per year, water consumption by 82,000 cubic meters per year, and solid waste generation by 800 tons per year.

The high potential for resource efficiency in the Lebanese industrial companies, as largely demonstrated by the SwitchMed MED TEST program, has motivated the European Union to fund a new project with a budget of €3.7 million. This project, known as Private Sector Transition to Green and Circular Economy in Lebanon, or the 2Circular project, aims to significantly upscale the implementation of resource efficiency in the Lebanese industrial sector.

The 2Circular Project: Private Sector Transition to Green and Circular Economy in Lebanon

The multifaceted approach of the 2Circular project begins with the capacity building of 30 Lebanese engineers and service providers across different disciplines to become RECP experts. This involves various activities, starting with a theoretical workshop at MSFEA that took place in February 2024. Delivered by Green Path Solutions from Jordan, the UNIDO Training of the Trainers on the application of UNIDO's TEST methodology on the transfer of environmentally sound technologies in industry to service providers in Lebanon set the foundation. A complementary practical three-day workshop, scheduled for the end of March 2024 at the Lebanese University, will delve into food systems, utilities, and associated resource efficiency potential, led by national resource efficiency experts appointed by UNIDO.

The project's first phase targets the assessment of 15 companies in the food and beverages sector, identifying resource inefficiencies in water, energy, and materials. Recommendations will be proposed to enhance resource efficiency, lower production costs, reduce environmental impact, and foster sustainability towards a circular economy.

Upon successful completion of this phase, service providers will be awarded an RECP Expert certificate, jointly delivered by UNIDO, AUB, and the Lebanese University.

During the initial phase of theoretical training, Professor Ghauch underscored the profound implications of the project, extending far beyond the confines of training. He envisioned a collective commitment to fostering cleaner and more sustainable industrial practices, urging participants to embrace the role of ambassadors in implementing circular economy principles in Lebanon. The American University of Beirut, he emphasized, is steadfast in its dedication to ensuring the success and long-term sustainability of the project.

Professor Ghauch went on to advocate for the institutionalization of this newfound culture within the university's student body. Rather than being limited to isolated courses on resource efficiency and cleaner production, he proposed the integration of these principles into a comprehensive online diploma program. This strategic approach aims to embed sustainable practices at a foundational level, fostering a lasting impact. He also expressed optimism that

such a transformative development could serve as a model for other academic institutions in the region, promoting a wider adoption of circular economy practices. The initiative has already gained momentum and is poised to catalyze positive change within the educational landscape of Lebanon and beyond.

During the launch, Dr. Nada Sabra, the liaison and resource efficiency officer of the 2Circular Project at UNIDO, expressed her support to AUB, as UNIDO's Technical Executing Partner for the training activities on the TEST methodology, reinforcing the collaborative spirit of the initiative.

The 2Circular project is implemented by UNIDO in partnership with national stakeholders comprising the Ministries of Industry, Economy and Trade; Environment; and Finance from the public sector; as well as the Association of the Lebanese Industrialists and the Federation of the Chambers of Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture from the private sector. Partners from academia include the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese University.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 750 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 8000 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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