

For Immediate Release



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AUB Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences Launches a report on revitalizing Lebanon's rural areas and a competition for innovation in agriculture

The Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosted two consecutive launches on Tuesday, June 18, 2019. The first session was the launch of the IFPRI 2019 Global Food Policy Report: Revitalizing Rural Areas in Lebanon and the second was the soft launch of the WBG DigitalAG4MENA Competition.

The first session, held in collaboration with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), was one in a series of launches that have been held in major cities around the globe including Washington, Moscow, Brussels, Beijing, and New Delhi. IFPRI's 2019 Global Food Policy Report (GFPR) reviews major food policy developments and events from the past year, and highlights challenges and opportunities for 2019 at the global and regional levels. This year's report spotlights the urgent need for rural revitalization to address persistent crises such as food insecurity, poverty and inequality, and environmental degradation that deeply affect rural people worldwide, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The session featured two keynote speakers: Clemens Breisinger, senior research fellow and country program leader, IFPRI Egypt, and Fatma Abdelaziz, research associate, IFPRI Egypt. Breisinger highlighted the global themes and key findings of this year's GFPR. He argued that the key building blocks for productive, sustainable, and healthy rural areas lie in five pillars: connectivity and integration of rural and urban areas to boost employment and livelihoods; gender equality through increasing women's participation, particularly in governance and policy; an environment which provides economic incentives and provides an opportunity to invest in innovative practices and technologies; renewable energy that promotes investment and competition among providers; and governance to ensure a predictable regulatory environment.

Rural revitalization is critical, timely, and achievable and addressing the rural crisis will help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and alleviate the impacts of climate change.

Next, Abdelaziz presented the GFPR's relevant findings for the MENA region. She highlighted the cluster-based development approach, a geographic concentration of many interconnected businesses which can build on the strengths of local communities, and offered illustrations of existing handicrafts, furniture, and textile clusters in Lebanon. The approach offers new prospects for youth to revitalize rural areas, thereby resulting in job creation and poverty reduction in countries like Egypt and Lebanon.

The speakers were then joined for a panel discussion featuring Shady Hamadeh, professor and director of the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU) at FAFS; Julian Lampietti, manager for the Global Agriculture Practice in the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, World Bank; Constantin Salameh, senior coach and investment advisor at Berytech/Agrytech; Faten Adada, agriculture officer - Regional Initiative for Small Scale Family Farming, FAO Regional Office for Near East and North Africa countries; and Ghassan Al Salman, field officer at ESDU. The discussion that followed raised vigorous debate on the importance of engaging and empowering rural people, particularly women, to achieve rural revitalization; the dimensions and possibilities of leap-frogging into digitization whereby water scarcity, digital technologies, and women and youth present opportunities to leverage open data, digital payment backup, investment in infrastructure, and human capital to revive rural areas; the optimal process to promote agricultural and non-agricultural "incubators" with a focus on investments in scalable, high social impact companies in MENA; and the importance of building a resilient agriculture sector in the MENA region through linking farmers to markets, social protection and bridging the pillars of decent work with those of food security.

The second session held in collaboration with the World Bank Group (WBG) continued the discussion around themes of agricultural revitalization through the use of digital technologies. The WBG's latest focus in the MENA region has been on strengthening agricultural markets and raising the profile of the agricultural sector. Its DigitalAG4MENA competition will be an opportunity to crowdsource innovative information and communication technology (ICT) solutions, targeted at raising efficiency, equity and environmental sustainability of food systems in MENA. DigitalAG4MENA is a scale up of the DigitalAG4Egypt competition throughout the entire region, starting with Lebanon as the second country following Egypt. This soft launch kicked off a great opportunity for the agriculture entrepreneurs and professionals in the Arab world who are looking to apply and implement their agriculture, business, and technology knowledge and create value in their society.

The WBG session featured four speakers who joined for a panel discussion: Hadi Jaafar, assistant professor of irrigation engineering and water management at FAFS, who gave an overview of the latest applications in remote sensing and smart farming; Ramy Boujawdeh, deputy general manager, Berytech, presenting a snapshot of the agricultural entrepreneurial ecosystem in Lebanon and highlighting the role of Agrytech in helping innovators transform

their ideas into businesses that can grow globally; Nisrine Turkey, co-founder of IoTree, pioneering artificial intelligence (AI) driven smart electronic devices capable of detecting and identifying agricultural pests and notifying the farmers via a mobile application when, where, and how to intervene, thereby improving farmers' production while reducing the use of pesticides; and Fatma El Zahraa Aglan, agricultural specialist, World Bank Group, who launched DigitalAG4MENA.

An audience of over 60 participated in both sessions, including faculty, students, alumni, and external guests from academia, the public and private sectors, from organizations including the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), and from NGOs and civil society.

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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 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 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 420-bed hospital.

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