

AFED Conference on Sustainable Consumption Kicks off in Beirut

Subsidies encourage waste and the Arab public is willing to change consumption patterns

Beirut, 16/11/2015

The Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) launched today its report *Sustainable Consumption for Better Resource Management*, at the opening of its eighth annual conference, held at the Phoenicia Hotel in Beirut, 16-17 November.

The report found that indiscriminate subsidies of water, energy and food in the Arab region promote wasteful consumption, and do not necessarily ease the burden on the poor, as over 90 percent of the subsidies go to the rich. However, the report identified a clear trend for change in this regard, with six Arab countries implementing subsidy reforms over the past two years. It added that all environmental programs will not work unless accompanied by fundamental change in the way we consume resources and produce waste.

The conference brought together about 600 delegates from 48 countries, representing governments, corporations, regional and international organizations, research centers, universities, civil society and the media. Environment agency- Abu Dhabi participated as official partner in the conference, also supported by many regional and international organizations, development funds and the private sector.

AFED secretary-general Najib Saab presented the results of a public opinion survey conducted by AFED in 22 Arab countries, to find out to what extent people are ready to change their consumption patterns. The survey concluded that the Arab public is willing to pay more for electricity, fuel and water and to change consumption habits if this will help preserve resources and protect the environment. Over 80 percent said they would accept changing some aspects of their dietary habits, such as eating more chicken and fish than red meat, which is better for the environment and health.

The survey also showed a growing interest in energy efficiency, with more than half of the participants choosing electricity and fuel efficiency as the main criteria when buying an electric appliance or a car. However, a vast majority reaching 99 percent in some countries believe that their governments were not doing enough to

address environmental problems, and that the environment in their countries had deteriorated over the past ten years.

The opening session included a statement by Dr. Adnan Badran, chairman of AFED's board of trustees, who said that "Beirut will always be a lively city, and Lebanon has taught us the love of life, freedom and hard work, in spite of its political differences."

Dr. Hafez Ghanem, World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa, gave a keynote address emphasizing green investment and the World Bank outlook for helping the region to overcome its difficulties. He said that the WB operations in Lebanon were affected by the Parliament inability to approve projects and loans. But they will be resumed with the approval last week of three projects, including the Bisri dam and an environmental project. Future projects will be discussed.

He emphasized the link between environmental degradation and social and economic instability, adding that "groups like AFED are creating traction across the Arab region for a more environmentally sustainable future, turning environmental challenges into opportunities," and that "good environmental stewardship is good development."

Ghanem explained that the World Bank uses five indicators of environmental stress in the region. It is evident, first, that Arab countries are squandering their natural capital on which their economies rely on, including forests, oil, clean air and clean water. Second, the costs of environmental degradation are very high, estimated for example at 2% of GDP in Tunisia, 4% in Lebanon and 5% in Egypt. Third, the availability of clean water is declining, with a 42% decrease between 1992 and 2014. Fourth, people breathing polluted air in the region has increased by 50% since 1990, and 8% of total deaths are due to air pollution. Fifth, the region is the hottest in the world and is enduring the harsh impacts of climate change.

Facing these challenges, Ghanem highlighted good practices being implemented in the Arab World that should be scaled up, especially energy efficiency and renewable energy projects, sustainable consumption of water resources, pollution management, recycling and cleaner production. Such projects are receiving favorable loans.

The conference sessions discussed water and food consumption patterns in the Arab region, sustainable food systems, renewable energy and energy efficiency, subsidies and their impact on consumption. Thematic sessions discussed the main

outcomes of Eye on Earth summit in Abu Dhabi, regional preparation for the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP in May 2016. University students from 12 Arab countries discussed their views on resource management in the Future Environmental Leaders Forum (FELF) supported by AFED. Healthy Mediterranean food was served for lunch, in consistency with the conference theme Sustainable Consumption.

The conference continues Tuesday with sessions on Green finance, fighting climate change by changing consumption and production patterns, policies for sustainable living, consumption and production in post-2015 sustainable development agenda. Two thematic sessions will address innovative entrepreneurship for sustainable lifestyles and UNEP regional consultation on Global Environment Outlook GEO6. Conclusions and recommendations of the conference will be released in a closing plenary.

Full AFED report on Sustainable Consumption can be downloaded from www.afedonline.org

Photo Captions:

Photo 1: Najib Saab at conference opening

Photo 2: Keynote speech by Dr. Hafez Ghanem, World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa

Photo 3: Dr. Ibrahim Abdelgelil presenting AFED report on Sustainable Consumption

Facts and figures from AFED 2015 report on Sustainable Consumption

-- Over the last decades, rapidly growing populations, rural-urban migration and perverse subsidies have contributed to a rising demand for energy, water, food and other finite resources in the Arab region. Individuals and institutions need to change their consumption habits and lifestyles towards more sustainable behavior.

-- AFED report *Sustainable Consumption* found that indiscriminate subsidies of water, energy and food promote wasteful consumption, and do not necessarily ease the burden on the poor – over 90 percent of the subsidies go to the rich.

However, the report identified a clear trend for change in this regard, with six Arab countries implementing subsidy reforms over the past two years.

-- In view of tracking how people perceive consumption and to what extent they are ready for positive change, AFED carried out a public opinion survey, which drew over 31,000 participants from 22 Arab countries. The survey found that the Arab public is ready to pay more for energy and water and to change their consumption patterns if this will help preserve resources and protect the environment.

-- A vast majority of over 80 percent said they would accept changing some aspects of their dietary habits, such as eating more fish and chicken than red meat, which is better for the environment as well as consumers' health. Reducing consumption of red meat in the Arab region by only 25 percent, from about 17 kg per capita per year, would save about 27 billion cubic meters of water, considering that it takes about 16 cubic meters to produce 1 kg of red meat.

-- The survey showed a growing interest in resource efficiency, since about half chose electricity and fuel efficiency as the main criteria when buying an electrical appliance or a car.

-- A vast majority, reaching 99 percent in some countries, thought that their governments were not doing enough to address environmental problems and that the environment in their countries had deteriorated over the past ten years.