



AFED's 12th Annual Conference Opens in Beirut

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN ARAB COUNTRIES

Beirut, 14/11/2019

The Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) launched its annual report, *Environmental Education in Arab Countries*, at its 12th conference on Thursday, November 14, at the Bristol Hotel in Beirut. The report provides the first comprehensive survey of environmental contents in school and university curricula across the Arab countries, in view of identifying gaps and recommending pathways to enhance the role of education in advancing environmental protection and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Due to the prevailing circumstances in Lebanon, the conference followed an innovative format based on large roundtable presentations and discussions among authors and delegates. The report will be later presented in selected countries over the coming weeks, to allow a chance of discussion for those who couldn't be in Beirut.

BADRAN: DEVELOPING SKILLS TO FACE CHALLENGES

The sessions opened with a welcoming speech by the Chairman of AFED Board of Trustees, Dr. Adnan Badran, who said that environmental awareness and sustainable development should be built through teaching and environmental education at all levels. He said that "Environmental education is a process of teaching and learning that aims to promote values and concepts that lead to people's awareness of the environment and its challenges, and contribute to the development of skills to meet these challenges in order to make informed decisions."

SAAB: A MESSAGE OF HOPE

AFED Secretary General Najib Saab presented AFED achievements in 2019, pointing out that the previous AFED reports maintain their position as the most respected reference on Arab environment. The forum's magazine website, *Environment and Development*, continued to reach an increasing number of users, up to 26 million a year. Saab added that, in conjunction with the conference, AFED published a manual for environmental education as a reference for school environmental curricula, which will also be available online. AFED also continued to play a pivotal role with regional and international partners in 2019, by contributing to 25 environmental policy reports and researches, and being elected to the board of two international networks. Declining funding in an explosive region remains the main challenge for AFED, a situation that threatens the organization's ability to continue its work.

REPORT FINDINGS

AFED's new report, *Environmental Education in Arab Countries*, found that during the last decade, Arab universities witnessed a rapid increase in programs related to the environment and sustainable development. Collectively, the 57 universities surveyed offer 221 degree programs on environmental topics. Postgraduate programs are typically research-oriented. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been found to be the most active in environmental research output. The report noted that Arab universities can further accelerate their contribution to sustainability by integrating all of the SDGs into their learning and teaching activities, research, and community initiatives. It observed specific weakness in the domains of environmental law and green economy. One pivotal recommendation of

the report is offering an introductory course on environment and sustainability to all first year university students.

An AFED survey of school textbooks and curricula found that environmental topics most popular in Arab schools are ecosystems, natural resources, pollution and sustainable development. In contrast to the inclusion of the rather new topic of sustainable development, the survey found that climate change was absent or not adequately discussed in 40 percent of the countries. The report recommended that big challenges facing the region such as water scarcity, desertification, drought, marine pollution and dangers of sea-level rise due to climate change, have to become a central part of the curricula.

Although a strong trend can be seen in the inclusion of environmental topics in the curricula, progress remains uneven across Arab countries and educational institutions. More so, it is evident that there is a clear gap between the Arab region and other parts of the world when it comes to environmental education. In part, this is due to the ongoing unrest and conflict in some Arab countries. Paradoxically, some of the countries which are in a state of turmoil, like Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, had taken serious measures over the past years to integrate environment and sustainability into their education systems. Another problem is the lack of funding for national and regional initiatives to promote sustainable development topics at schools and universities. As most initiatives are dependent on international donors, they are largely not sustainable.

The report concluded that education is a major driver for a shift to more sustainable lifestyle that ensures harmony with nature and a balanced use of resources. It also equips those entrusted with executing change with the necessary working tools and appropriate knowledge. Education has the power to nurture empowered, engaged and skilled citizens who can map the way towards a balanced, greener and safer planet.

SESSIONS

First day conference sessions revolved around the role of education in achieving sustainable development, environmental education in Arab universities, a discussion of the proposed syllabus for first year university students entitled "Introduction to Environment and Sustainability", as well as a special presentation regarding the Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development. Speakers included Adnan Shihabeldin, Director General of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, Ahmed Al Qabany from the Islamic Development Bank, Rabih Mohtar, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences (FAFS) at AUB, Ibrahim Abdelgelil from the Arabian Gulf University and Abdulkarim Sadik from Kuwait Fund, Rola Majdalani, Director of Sustainable Development Policies Division at ESCWA and Fadi El Hage, Director of Eco-Citizenship and Sustainable Development Chair at Saint Joseph University.

Conference sessions resume on Friday, discussing Environmental Education in Arab Schools, and launching AFED's Environmental Education Guidebook for Schools. There will be a special viewing of a selection of winning short movies from the 2019 International Environmental Film Festival and a session. A special session will include Arab students from AFED's Future Environment Leaders Forum (FELF). The recommendations of the conference, which will be sent later to governments and Arab and international bodies, will be announced at the end of the last session on Friday afternoon.

AFED report Environmental Education in Arab Countries can be found at www.afedonline.org/webreport2019/afedreport2019.htm