

**Arab Forum for Environment and Development**  
**AUB President Fadlo Khuri, MD**  
**November 10, 2020**

Colleagues, friends, it is my pleasure to be with you today. We at AUB are proud to be partnering with AFED to hold this unique and much-needed gathering of experts as we face the onslaught of multiple crises that have serious implications for the health and wellbeing of this region's people and environment.

This year has witnessed dramatic and unprecedented challenges worldwide, to public health, food systems, education, people's livelihoods, and their businesses. The development gains seen in many countries over the past decade could well be erased. The COVID-19 pandemic is a major driver of these hardships, but many countries were already facing crises before the virus outbreak—Lebanon being a prime example—and these have only been exacerbated.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century political philosopher and revolutionary activist Thomas Paine, who quit his native England to

move to America at the time of their Revolution, penned these words, which General Washington read out to his beleaguered troops before they crossed the Delaware River, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” I am sure that every man and woman here can relate to that.

The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic has been devastating. According to the WHO, tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, nearly half of the world’s 3.3 billion global workforce could lose their jobs, while the number of undernourished people could increase to over 800 million by the end of the year.

The world’s food system is also struggling today as farmers lose access to markets, whether it is to purchase inputs or sell produce. Agriculture workers—who are often self-employed and lack labor protection—are facing unemployment and extreme poverty. Those are the people who feed the rest of us.

Our environment is also at greater risk, despite the popular notion that the COVID-19 pandemic has been

good for the environment. Environmental issues are being given less priority by governments and leaders due to the other crises they are facing. In China this past May, as that country emerged from lockdown and factories looked to make up for lost time, pollution returned to pre-pandemic levels and sometimes surpassed them. In Brazil, illegal loggers actually accelerated their deforestation of the Amazon rainforest in the midst of the pandemic, clearing 64% more land in April 2020 compared to the same time in 2019. As you all know, the list of such environmental disasters could perhaps go on forever.

The environment, food security, public health, employment, and labor issues are all connected and spiraling downward in Lebanon and in the Global South. Now, more than ever, is the time for action and solidarity across borders and societies.

Here is where universities play a major role in hopefully building a better tomorrow, or a better “new normal.” This can be done through research, educational programs, informing public policy, and simply encouraging our youth to be and do better than us.

Going back to Thomas Paine, he also gave us these inspiring words, written at the outset of the Revolution and the beginning of the “great American experiment”, an experiment that has seemed particularly at risk during these turbulent times: “We have the power to begin the world over again.” That, indeed, is what we must do now. We need to remake the world to be more inclusive, more sustainable, and more equitable. That is the ultimate goal of this report and so much of what we all endeavor to do. It will not happen overnight, and it will not be easy, but if we persist and give it our all, I am confident that we will prevail.

I am very grateful for the hard work that has been put into creating this report and I look forward to seeing how it will contribute in planning health-related programs throughout the Arab region. As educators, scientists, and concerned citizens, it is our duty to do all we can to ensure a better, more sustainable, more inclusive world, for our generation and generations to follow.

Thank you.