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Search

AFED Brochure
PREVIOUS AFED CONFERENCES AFED
2017 Report of the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED)
ARAB ENVIRONMENT IN 10 YEARS

ABOUT AFED
WHY AFED?
GOVERNANCE
BACKGROUND
MISSION STATEMENT
GOALS
COURSE OF ACTION
BOARD OF TRUSTEES
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
FUNDING

NEWS
MEMBERS NEWS
EVENTS
LATEST REPORTS
PUBLICATIONS
NEWSLETTER
PHOTO ALBUMS new
VIDEO ALBUMS new

PROGRAMS
CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY (CER)
AFED's MAIN PROGRAMS
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM - EDM
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM - AFED
STATE OF ARAB ENVIRONMENT
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

MEMBERSHIP
WHO CAN BE MEMBER?
HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER?
WHY BECOME A MEMBER?
MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

ABOUT OUR MEMBERS
ENVIRONMENTAL LINKS
RESEARCH FORUM new
CONTACT US
MEET AFED SECRETARY GENERAL

Investment in youth should be government priority : FELF statement at AFED conference 2016

30/11/2016

52 students from 12 Arab universities, meeting at AFED's Forum for Future environmental leaders (FELF), presented a youth statement to the closing session of AFED's annual conference on Sustainable Development in a Changing Arab Climate held at the American University of Beirut. Here is their statement:

The AFED conference this year is entitled ''Sustainable development in a changing Arab climate''. We are no longer waiting for the Climate to change; it has changed. Despite the fact that climatic changes are natural processes that have occurred throughout the history of this planet; our anthropogenic activities are accelerating this natural process leaving us with so little time to adapt.
Our generation is a witness of such transformations. We are witnessing what many predicted years ago but were taken for granted by a system that only cared and still cares about financial profit. We must not make the same mistake and underestimate what we are now predicting for the future despite the large uncertainty. We are no longer working only to prevent climatic alterations; we reached a phase where we have to cope and adapt to the unexpected. We do have many models to predict weather changes. However, our experience on earth is below the freshman level. We have been on this earth for 200,000 years. Nevertheless, the earth has existed for more than 4.5 billion years. We really need to be modest about this.

We, as members of the young generations, feel detached from our governments. We are separated from the policies and entities that are the only influence of change on a macro scale. We will not be able to adapt or prepare our children to adapt unless our governments implement policies concerned with sustainable and effective adaptive solutions, and make sure they are implemented. There are several civil movements and organizations that are working with governments to achieve such goals. Nevertheless, this is not enough. We need new blood in our political systems. However, this new blood is often kept away by the older political generations. We need systems that not only praise the role of the youth in the communities but implement their role and transform it into actual action. Bottom line, we need fewer theories and more actions when it comes to youth's involvement in political changes that will ultimately lead to sustainable changes. Change is needed, change that is based on youth empowerment, youth encouragement.

We urge you today to make it a priority on your agendas to invest in the youth of your countries.

Deloitte

The students met in 6 groups and discussed 6 topics: Climate change; Food security, poverty and agriculture; Water; Energy; Food - water - energy nexus; Sustainable consumption and production. Here are group statements cited at the closing session of AFED's annual conference on Sustainable Development in a Changing Arab Climate.

Topic 1: Climate change
According to USA today magazine, one of the most frequent questions asked is 'does the recent slowdown of warming mean that climate change is no longer happening'? Now, to all those who are skeptical, it is true! In fact, people are experiencing the significant impacts of climate change, which include changing weather patterns, rising sea level, more extreme weather events and infectious disease spread.

The problem with climate change today, is that most institutions, governments and investors believe that it is of high cost economically, in terms of using renewable energy and the decrease in profits compared to the profits generated by using fossil fuel. However, that in fact is a fallacy! As Mr. Amin Assadollahi mentioned yesterday in the conference '' we focus so much on the billions of dollars that it costs to implement the use of renewable energy, and lose sight of the trillions of dollars it saves in business and health costs''. One example of this was presented by Dr. Adnan Badran yesterday when he mentioned that AUD is now using solar panels for energy, and is thus saving $150,000 every month!

Now, let's imagine this strategy is not only implemented in one institution, not only in one nation; but all over the world, in countries such as Lebanon or Somalia who have no natural resource for producing electricity. If a country like Lebanon was able to implement such a strategy, it would save billions in costs and even create more revenue. This would boost economies all over the Arab region and as well create a safer environment.

Climate change is a very dangerous threat to the future of our world, and thus for this threat to be contained, governments need to be the ones who push for change, for new policies and rules that enforce the use of renewable energy in houses and enterprises all over the world. If organizations all over the world make this a priority on their agenda, then and only then will we be able to provide sustainable development for the future of our environment and the world economy.

Topic 2: Food security, poverty and agriculture
There are many factors are contributing to poverty in the Arab region, including but not limited to:
1. The uneven distribution in wealth amongst the region.
2. The existing corruption within all levels of governmental institutions within the region
3. The ever-increasing unemployment rate, which has increased due to the increase in the minimum wage to $4. This has decreased job opportunities and has therefore led to an increase in poverty levels. In addition to this, regional conflicts have not allowed for poverty levels to be corrected, but have rather accelerated them.
4. The failure to develop the agricultural sector in the region, due to several reasons such as a lack of investment in the market etc.
Poverty, agriculture and food security are all interlinked and the improvement of one of the categories will lead to development in another. In order to improve food security within the region, numerous efforts should be made:

1- Arab states must work to improve their relations (political, economical, etc.) as they are not in control of their fresh water sources- individualistic behaviors can lead to water scarcity.
2- Farmers must be educated on sustainable farming practices (i.e. improvement of their agricultural methods, such as switching from fossil fuels to more sustainable forms of energy). Moreover, farmers must be provided with the appropriate tools in order to succeed and make a shift towards sustainable farming. In an effort to improve food security, nutritional benefits of the food being produced are necessary. They must be informed on which foods are beneficial towards their health (in a sustainable manner) such as switching from beef to more sustainable forms of protein. Along with learning that protein can be found in fish and certain vegetables.
3- Debatably one of the most important factors in the improvement of food security is the investment in the agricultural sector. This can be facilitated by public sector by creating favorable policies and the governments (or international organizations) subsidizing the agricultural sector. By decreasing the risk associated with food production, such as by reducing the interest rate on loans, profit-seeking firms will be drawn to invest in agriculture and help develop the sector. The improvement of the agricultural sector will increase food security and decrease poverty. Investment will create employment opportunities at all sectors of the economy (ranging from low income to the higher socio- economic class). In addition, this will allow for research to be undertaken regarding tolerant seeds suitable to the unfavorable environmental conditions in the Arab region.
4- Increased investment in the sector will allow for an increase in trade within the Arab region. It is necessary that the economic flow between the Arab regions be improved upon. Each of the states in the Arab region cannot support themselves in isolation, however, increased interdependence can allow for the Arab region to provide for itself (to an extent). Trade will improve the relations that states have with each other and increase cooperation (using the economy as a platform to facilitate dialogue). Growing the food production sector will allow the Arab region to decrease its dependence on the west (and other parts of the world) for food- therefore improving food security in the region through self-sufficiency.
5- The environment must allow for the creation and implementation of Innovative ideas in the region. Subsistence farming, for example can be executed through urban agriculture. While several areas within the Arab region are fertile and can be transformed for productive means, many cannot. In the many states where land is not available, or arid, vertical farming can be implemented. In addition, the water scarce nature of the region is a challenge for the improvement of food security, a possible solution can be soil-less farming. This will allow for the consumption of water, without affecting the quality of the water (through the recycling of water).

Topic 3: Water
Sustainable development is developing and providing the current generation by means of natural resources without impoverishing future generations. It all relies on structuring a well-minded and knowledgeable culture based on innovation and initiatives.
Our governments' main goal is increasing the standards of living and the qualities of life in general. Nonetheless, sustainable development aims for continuous increase in the standards of living. Without sustainable production, sustainable development would remain a dream. Therefore, our future relies on the amount we produce today and what we are able to produce tomorrow.
Some may easily access water, while others still are unable to find it nor could access safe sanitized water. If water does face continuous shortage, that would force inadequacy of healthy fruits and vegetable as well as, other commodities. Thus, the standards of living will descend eventually with fewer water resources.
The effects of climate change and global warming on available water in the region is increasing yearly and should be observed.
The water sector is vulnerable and exposed to various challenges such as:

1. Fast population growth and increased demand for groundwater opposing low supplies.
2. The geographic location of our region that falls in dry land, placing them below the water poverty line.

3. Cheap water prices which leads to careless water consumption either in domestic use or other sectors.
4. Changes in consumption patterns in many Arab countries has lead to an increase consumption per capita.
5. Balance disruption between Groundwater abstraction and recharge in water aquifers which has lead to a decrease in piezometric heads.
6. Lack of adequate protection for groundwater against pollution that is caused by surface activities.
7. Lack of water security, management and control of water resources.

Suggestions and solutions to achieve sustainable developmental goals:
1. Reduce the groundwater abstraction and balance it with recharge rates by bringing the treated used water back to the aquifer either by natural or artificial means.
2. Improving irrigation efficiency through the water consumption orientations and by staying updated to new innovations.
3. Apply new tariff policies for water use in different sectors.
4. Select a different tariff for drinking water, while emphasizing on the importance of homogenizing the prices between different sectors, which means no subsidies for the industrial sector nor agricultural sector.
5. Raise community awareness on water value through education, curriculum campaigns and social media in order to protect this valuable resource.

Topic 4: Energy
The Arab world suffers from several issues, and energy is one of them. None-renewable energy is the biggest issue in the Arab world specially the fossil fuel.

First:
With the "spring revolutions" or the current conflicts, the fuel price decreased from almost 100$ per barrel to 46$ almost.
This phenomenon is a" two face coin":
a- On the fuel exporter countries: a huge retract in their returns
b- On the fuel importers countries: which have consume more oil and fuel which had led to increase the pollution ratio
Second:
On the water scale, a huge amount of water is wasted in the Arab area instead of using it to produce electricity or using it for cooling as in Germany in the EXPO 2000 building, where water is used to cool the building by irrigation the garden on the top of it: water and energy economy!
Third:
The constant relay on the fossil fuel will lead to a poor economy as it is none-renewable.
Forth:
The climate in the Arab world offers some big advantages:
a- The wind speed is enough and appropriate to produce energy from it
b- The solar hour per day will reduce the consumption of fossil fuel
Those solution will impact the economy and the pollution ratio for the best of course.
Finally:
One of the most recent ways to produce energy is out of garbage just like in Sweden,
But a stair should be taken step by step to get the stop so we can start from a personal level by recycling!
The authority should be involved to make recycling a law where the violators must be punished and must pay for the violation as for the money is so important to some people.

Topic 5: Food - water - energy nexus
When the main life requirements: Water, Food and Energy are studied, an approach is designed to study their interrelation. This we call the Nexus. The Nexus demonstrates how these elements are highly dependent on each other. For example, energy is harvested and is used to extract water from underground sources. Water gets purified through an energy demanding process and is then used for agriculture to produce food. For us humans, food is an important source of energy as it contains minerals, proteins, and other nutrients that are important for our daily activities. And so on goes the cycle. For the Arab case, the nexus must take into consideration the resources of our geography, the demand of our population and the limitations we are facing regarding water in particular.
As a renewable energy source, we can all agree that solar is our best option as we live under the solar belt. Now, to help flourish this field, we recommend a subsidizing policy by the government called Feed-in Tarrif. Feed-in tarrif is mainly used in Europe, and it is the main factor behind Europe's great run into renewables and the down-cost of solar panels. However, for Feed-in Tarrif to work, privatization of the electrical grid is a requirement. but privatization is a need due to the inadequacy of some national grids to satisfy the population electricity demand.

As for water, many Arab regions are scarce in water due to the fact that we are on the solar belt, and that we are primarily affected by global warming. Sea water purification and deep underground digging are a must to provide water at reasonable prices. Efficient irrigation is very important, but is energy consuming. But having the above renewable energy drive, the energy requirements of agriculture can be met and can be met sustainably.
From there, with proper water irrigation and control systems mass food production can be met. Establishing the nexus.

Topic 6: Sustainable consumption and production
When talking about natural resources, we always talk about each element as a separate entity and how we can turn it into a product. However, Natural landscapes have been overlooked and often destroyed in the process of extracting natural resources. We believe that nature should be given a consumption value, and should be seen as a whole entity. Our input introduces the field of environmental psychology which studies the interrelation of humans, their behavior and environment.

This study indicates that humans have an innate affinity and love to Nature, which is referred to as biophilia. The study identifies and assesses nature benefits on health factors such as BP and stress.
And one theory presents 4 components that ordinarily makes us cope with attention fatigue: Being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility.

Because we live in a capitalist world, humans have to add an economic aspect to what this nature offers us to perceive it as valuable.
Let's translate physical and psychological health benefits into capital input:

• Reflecting on Health economics for the loss of capita due to medical spending
• Cost of productivity loss due to overabundance of stimuli and attention fatigue
• Benefit of increased conceptual capacity, attention and memory with the help of nature.
Now that we have showcased how the valuation of nature can appeal to the economic thinkers, we should also communicate the same idea to the next generation through education.
We must aim for a generation that has an appreciation for a sense of community and a sense of entitlement for shared nature which would fuel creative thinking to find alternative methods for extracting natural resources without diminishing nature.

In conclusion,
People should know why we need nature and how, by losing nature, we are losing money.

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