

## **AUB researchers help find ways to market agro-foods**

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Agriculture Minister Hussein El Hajj Hassan told an AUB audience that marketing of agro-food products starts from the day the seed is sown in the field.

"If food quality and safety are not ingrained in the cultivation process, then no kind of marketing will succeed," he said.

El Hajj Hassan was speaking during a seminar organized by the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB), under the patronage of the Ministry of Agriculture and in collaboration with the Faculty of Agriculture at the Lebanese University. Entitled "Effective public policies for the marketing of Lebanese agro-food products," the conference was held on February 17 and attended by politicians, engineers, professors as well as students, thus reflecting the important role this sector plays in the Lebanese economy and in the lives of the general public.

The minister invited conference participants to propose ways to improve the marketing of agro-food products, while factoring in a fair profit scheme for farmers, middle-men, and grocers.

"The marketing of agro-food products is way behind in Lebanon and this is partly due to farmers' abstinence from joining unions and associations that would protect their rights and prevent merchants from controlling the prices of their productions," he said. "Merchants are raising their prices in an unfair way and this is negatively affecting the marketing of Lebanese products in the outside markets."

El Hajj Hassan cited an example of such practices saying that the production of 1 kg of citrus fruit costs around LL384. The farmer sells it to the wholesaler for LL450, but it reaches the end consumer at LL1000.

The agricultural sector's importance to the Lebanese economy was discussed by AUB Assistant Professor of Economics Jad Chaaban who was among the speakers. "According to the latest World Bank statistics, 50 percent of families living in rural areas make a living out of this sector," he said.

"The agricultural sector constitutes 6.8 percent of the GDP in Lebanon and employs around 20 to 25 percent of laborers whether directly or indirectly," he added.

The seminar is part of AUB's continuous efforts to promote effective policy-making through evidence-based research and the collaboration of the private and public sectors in order to ensure the sustainable improvement of the lives of people throughout Lebanon, the Middle East region, and the world.

But improving food quality and safety cannot happen without ensuring social justice, noted El Hajj Hassan, who said that the ministry is working on helping farmers reduce their running costs.

"With the presence of globalization and trade liberalization, products can easily reach any country or market in the world. Hence, quality should be a priority for us to be able to succeed in competing with other markets."

He pledged to start with a new working plan at the ministry by modifying legislation which he described as "old or lacking some necessary articles for a better performance of the sector."

He added that he had reached an agreement with the government to raise the ministry's budget by 100 percent. "We are going to need a further increase in the future," he said.

From his side, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture at the Lebanese University, Tayssir Hamieh called on the establishment of a research center that is affiliated with the Lebanese University in collaboration with AUB and the Ministry of Agriculture as well as other interested universities.

“The center’s objective would be to conduct research in a variety of agricultural fields and to test and control the quality of local, imported and exported products, in addition to other tasks with the aim of protecting consumers,” he said.

Professor Nahla Hwalla, dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at AUB, praised AUB’s commitment to other universities and public institutions in the country. “We have lately added new programs to our curriculum and AUB is the first university to offer them in all of the Middle East. They include a bachelor's degree in agricultural business management which helps students gain the necessary skills for operating their own agricultural businesses in a profitable manner later on,” she said.

Other speakers at the conference included Samir Modawar, head of the Economic Agriculture Department at the Lebanese University; Hala Abdallah, head of the Economic and Marketing Department at the Ministry of Agriculture; Abbas Ramadan, representing the Investment Development Authority of Lebanon (IDAL); and Abdel Rahman Zaatari, representing exporters.