Welcome address
President Fadlo R. Khuri, MD
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Good morning! Your excellencies, representatives of the Lebanese Government and the Military Service, in particular Your Excellency Dr. Adnan Badran, former prime minister of Jordan, the University’s good friend, colleagues, faculty, and staff, and our alumnus and the founder of AFED, of course, Najib Saab, crusader for environmentalism like few others in the world. Welcome to the Ninth AFED Conference entitled “Sustaining Development Goals in a Changing Climate”.

We’re deeply honored to be hosting this conference at the American University of Beirut for the first time as part of our 150th Anniversary festivities. During the sesquicentennial year of AUB, we focused on numerous aspects of the University’s history and its future, our global impact, the service to our communities, the inclusivity of the University in academic excellence, exceptional medical care, athletics, and so on and so forth. But I also like to mention the remarkable servant-leadership shown by many individuals at AUB to make sure that this conference could be held here. In particular, I would like to thank Dean Iman Nuwayhid, Iman please stand up, whose idea it was to have this conference here. Thank you very much (Applause). And Associate Vice President Soha Hmaidan, who has worked on all of the details, again we thank Soha (Applause). This is what we need in the Arab world, we need people who are not interested in taking credit for good work.

There is really one concept that unites us all; it’s sustainability. The fact that AUB’s forerunner was founded by a small group of missionaries and educators back in 1866, 150 years ago, that its destiny has been seen to evolve into what you see today, the Arab world’s premier seat of secular, higher education, that engages in a discussion of sustainability and environmental stewardship, that should tell all you need to know about adaptability and the difficulties of adaptability that have stricken not only the region, but also the University over the last 150 years.

You might think that it’s an odd time to celebrate and discuss these challenges. Why are we celebrating our 150th Anniversary at a point when the Arab world is in a serious inflection point following the so-called Arab Spring? How appropriate is it even for a great university such as AUB to be feeding on its past accomplishments when quite candidly the world is on fire? And if any of you doubted that, you should see the US elections results yesterday! So, what is it that makes us genuinely optimistic about our future? I would think it is necessary to remind this learned audience to emphasize that AUB has always represented hope, change for the better, and the endeavor to genuinely improve the human condition of all of those around it. This University, its extraordinary alumni, its talented faculty, and generation after generation of outstanding students have a lot to say about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This University has, throughout its history, been at the forefront of efforts to end poverty and hunger to ensure better communal health, to promote gender equity, and to protect the environment, even fostering world peace at the foundation of the UN in 1945. Too bad that didn’t come off, but it wasn’t for a lack of effort.

Of course, our focus today is on SDG 4: “Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This is particularly close to the University’s mission, and it is where those with our academic background can see how long and how hard the path forward is. We note in the Arab world that a full half of the population in many of our countries is under the age of 24. We know that only 4% of those that go abroad to enhance their education ever come back to work productively in our Arab societies. We know that economic opportunities
for our youth are severely limited here once they complete their undergraduate, graduate, or post-graduate education. That is not their fault; that is the fault of the leadership of our nations that doesn’t allow these individuals to participate in the life that is full of health, happiness, participation in civil society. And yes, the University is becoming increasingly unaffordable for most people, which worsens social cohesion and increases economic disparity. Tuition increases have accelerated quite a bit in recent years, including at the American University of Beirut. But we’re not here to mourn the challenges or to give in; we’re engaged actively at AUB in finding solutions, looking at performance at the school level as well as implementing changes that we can make as a leading university in the region, to try to identify the knowledge and practice that we can share with our peers.

Once such major effort led by Drs. Saouma BouJaoude and Rima Karami is TAMAM, which is a school-based performance initiative being led by AUB, which presently includes work in eight different Arab countries. In this work, they recommend getting away from educational reform that’s conceptualized as large-scale and top-down, managed at the highest levels of ministries of education and other governmental institutions. For a region that’s in love with governmental decrees, in my experience as someone who has lived in the US for 33 years, real reform starts bottom-up, and is participatory and citizen-driven. The groups that are the most closely affected by this reform, the teachers, the principals, the students, and the parents need to have an active role, as Drs. BouJaoude and Karami point out, in conceptualizing, in reviewing, in providing feedback on reform plans. In countries that have efficient and productive educational systems, decentralization is the norm. Evidence suggests, not surprisingly, that such bottom-up approaches are much more effective in strengthening community participation in decision making and involving all stakeholders and in sustainability, the theme of our conference, of the impact of educational reform.

Improving the quality of secondary education is an immense appending and an empowering approach. It requires a shift in the paradigm that we employ towards reform which is conceived as transformative in its approach to leadership, teaching, and learning. It focuses on changing fundamental beliefs and habits of line rather than technical changes in behavior and practices. We can reduce the number of school days to 140, or 120, or 100, if we like, but unless the plurality of stakeholders from the level of the municipality, the school, the community, the university, and the government really buy in, reform, Ladies and Gentlemen, is not going to happen. Building capacity for leading change should constitute an integral part of the design emphasizing dialogue and collaborative and experiential learning to increase the possibility of sustaining the reform and its impact. Schools must concentrate on developing their self-renewing qualities, adopting self-organizing governance structures, embedding innovative ideas, and most of all, espousing a culture of collaboration. That’s what we advocate, as so nicely pointed out by Drs. BouJaoude and Karami in their paper. This connects the University and the government and institutions to schools, and it embeds them in their local communities in a productive relationship, investing in their assets and serving their needs.

That’s speaking about schools. But, what about higher education? Our most urgent objective as an administration has been to prevent the continued acceleration of tuition fees that are spiraling out of the reach of all, but the wealthiest families in the region. We’re finding savings all across campus, we’re holding down budgets, but if you want to attract the best and the brightest students and faculty, you still have to look after them, have resources for them, give scholarships where necessary, compensate top faculty and enable their research. So, we’re always on the lookout for partners who can come forward with assistance and with impactful change. We have major partnerships with several foundations including MasterCard, Al-Ghurair, USAID, ULYP and others. We don’t want to cut on the essentials. We also worked extremely well, I’m happy to say, with the
Lebanese Government, CNRS as represented today by its Secretary General Mouin Hamzeh who this year has leveraged over $600,000 in grants and financial assistance to our students and our faculty. Thank you Mr. Secretary General (Applause).

So, as we work to lessen the burden on our students, while at the same time we work to reverse the pernicious brain drain that our EVP and Dean of Medicine Mo Sayegh and our Associate Dean for Education Kamal Badre have identified as the root of transfer of leading physicians from Arab countries to the Occident, we also have to look at our challenges here economically. Lebanon’s economy, Ladies and Gentlemen, is simply unsustainable. It is an economy built on personal services, banking, and tourism. We have to look at fundamental changes in our economy that create jobs for people in a sustainable way, so that they don’t have any other alternative than emigration. That’s difficult work.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and colleagues, we’re here today not just to give you an opening speech, but to say that, on behalf of the University, along with our faculty, our students, our staff, we’re ready today to roll up our sleeves. We will work with any partner, in or outside the government, NGOs, nations, states, businesses, private sector, and others. The future is what we determine. It is not necessarily a bleak future, filled with extremism and anger. It can be a future that is bright, that is sustainable, that is empowered. Let’s stop making speeches, particularly political speeches, I abhor political speeches, after the US election I never want to hear another one again. Let’s roll up our sleeves, and let’s work together, as Mr. Saab and AFED have done for years.

Thank you very much.