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OF BEIRUT**

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AUB Celebrates Inclusion and Sustainability with Open Green Jobs Fair

The Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU) at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), in collaboration with AUB's NEXT STEP Program, hosted the "Inclusive Green Jobs and Skills Fair: A Festival of Sustainability and Inclusion."

The event, held at Sioufi Garden, marked a highlight of ESDU's 25th anniversary celebrations and formed part of the Sustainable Integrated Municipal Actions (SiMA) project's grant component, funded by the German government through KfW Development Bank and implemented in partnership with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

Taking place during Global Diversity Awareness Month, the fair brought together a dynamic community of people with special abilities, companies, NGOs, and public figures, celebrating empowerment, sustainability, and inclusion. It underscored how Lebanon's green economy can flourish through diversity, collaboration, and equal opportunities.

The day opened with warm introductions by event emcee Yara Hindy, journalist, reporter at MTV Lebanon, and ESDU's new ambassador.

Dr. Ammar Olabi, dean of FAFS at AUB, delivered the first speech highlighting that true sustainability includes people as much as the environment, calling for an inclusive green transition that empowers individuals with special abilities. "At the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at AUB, we believe that sustainability is not only about the environment, it is also about people. A truly sustainable society is one that values diversity, ensures equity, and gives every individual the opportunity to contribute meaningfully," he said.

In the second keynote speech, Dr. Shady Hamadeh, executive director of ESDU at AUB, highlighted the Sioufi Garden project as a model for revitalizing public spaces through community engagement, equitable green job opportunities, and shared responsibility. He noted, "This garden is your garden—preserve it as you would your home and see it as your shared environment and space for expression and connection."

In her speech, Mona Agha Maktabi, director of the NEXT STEP Program at AUB, touched upon the program's efforts to promote inclusion not merely as an initiative but as a culture that empowers individuals with special abilities to learn, work, and contribute fully, demonstrating that a truly sustainable future is one that leaves no one behind. "Our goal is also to create an

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inclusive community—one where our students are fully immersed in campus life, participating in activities alongside AUB students, engaging in collaborative projects, and learning from distinguished speakers and mentors from across AUB and AUBMC and the community as a whole.”

Hayssam Sayfan, Beirut Governor’s advisor, representing Governor of Beirut Marwan Abboud, delivered a thank-you note in which he acknowledged the efforts of authorities and entities in rehabilitating Sioufi Garden and expressed the Beirut Governorate’s willingness to provide support as needed to maintain this public garden as a space for the entire Sioufi and surrounding communities, ensuring it remains accessible to all.

Concluding the speeches, Dr. Ramona Al Danaf, president of the Lebanese Association for Sustainability and Social Responsibility (LASSR) said, “We are also committed to supporting people with special needs, believing that diversity is an invaluable societal strength.” She thanked ESDU at the American University of Beirut for its pioneering initiative in organizing this inspiring event, and added “In conclusion, our academic and community cooperation represents a solid step toward a greener, fairer, and more sustainable Lebanon, where challenges are transformed into opportunities, and individuals with special abilities are empowered to become active forces in the development process, in line with the Lebanon Green Vision 2030.”

Following the opening addresses, attendees were enthralled by a moving musical performance by violinist Gaelle Imad and percussionist Elias Kattan. Elias, a young man who has overcome personal challenges, demonstrated the power of determination and talent. Gaelle, a psychomotor therapy-certified violinist and educator, highlighted her dedication to teaching music and supporting individuals with special abilities, noting that “music is a therapy for the mind and body, and a language of creativity and freedom.”

Their harmonious and inspiring performance reflected the spirit of the event, celebrating inclusion through creativity and artistic expression.

The energy continued with a series of motivational talks under the theme “Inspiring Journeys of Sports and Success,” co-founders of Shooting Stars Academy, Rayan Mahfouz and Ayman El Kadi, shared moving personal stories that encouraged perseverance and adaptability in the face of life’s challenges. Omar Mussa, NEXT STEP Program fellow, followed with a powerful talk on his experience, emphasizing how ability, determination, and opportunity come together to build a truly inclusive and sustainable Lebanon.

Building on this inspiration, attendees explored interactive booths that showcased innovative green solutions, sustainable practices, and inclusive employment opportunities. Participants engaged directly with representatives from companies, NGOs, and institutions committed to environmental stewardship and social responsibility, gaining insights into Lebanon’s growing green economy and opportunities for people with special abilities.

The exhibition featured local and international entities that contribute to sustainable practices and employ people with special abilities, including Gray Mackenzie Retail Lebanon S.A.L (GMRL), NokNok, Coral Oil Company Limited, Beit Kanz, Beit al Baraka, TAQA Snacks, Arcenciel, Eshmoon, Agricom, Architecture in a Box, Ardi Ardak, Georges N. Frem Foundation (GNFF), and AUB’s NEXT STEP Program. The event was also supported by Agonista Coffee, a social enterprise dedicated to empowering individuals with special abilities through inclusive employment and ethical business practices.

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The Inclusive Green Jobs and Skills Fair served its purpose and underscored the intrinsic link between inclusion and sustainability, reaffirming the commitment of AUB's ESDU and NEXT STEP Program to empowering individuals, advancing equitable employment, and fostering sustainable livelihoods throughout Lebanon.

ENDS

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 790 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 9000 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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