

**Draft Keynote Speech –
Minister of Agriculture Dr Nizar Hani
CIHEAM Lebanese Alumni International Seminar
Theme: Investing in Youth for Sustainable Agri-Food Systems: Linking Education
to Job Opportunities and Sector Priorities**

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Dear Friends,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you today to the **First CIHEAM Lebanese Alumni International Seminar**, held here in Beirut. This event comes at a decisive time for Lebanon and for our agri-food sector, which is facing profound challenges but also immense opportunities.

The theme chosen for this seminar — *“Investing in Youth for Sustainable Agri-Food Systems”* — resonates deeply with our national priorities. It underlines the simple truth that the future of agriculture and food systems lies in the hands of young people. They are not only tomorrow’s leaders, they are already today’s innovators.

Lebanon’s agriculture is more than an economic sector. It is the heartbeat of our rural areas, the anchor that keeps families on their land, and the shield that safeguards our food sovereignty. It represents about 20% of rural employment and supports nearly one-quarter of households directly or indirectly. Yet, youth participation in the sector is still limited, with fewer than 10% of young people under 35 working in farming. This is both a challenge and an opportunity: we must make agriculture a career of choice, not of last resort.

Yet, it faces many challenges:

- **Climate change**, which is altering rainfall patterns, reducing water availability, and increasing risks of pests and diseases.
- **Economic and financial crises**, which have weakened farmers’ access to credit, inputs, and markets.
- **The impact of war and conflict**, which has destroyed infrastructure, displaced communities, and disrupted production in several regions.

These challenges are real, but they are not insurmountable.

The very difficulties we face also carry seeds of opportunity. Lebanon is blessed with fertile land, rich biodiversity, a resilient farming community, and a diaspora with strong ties to the homeland.

Our vision is clear: to move from traditional, fragmented practices to a **modern, technology-driven, and sustainable agri-food system** that can:

- provide dignified livelihoods for farmers,
- ensure food safety and nutrition for our people,
- improve the quality and effectiveness of our services to farmers,
- and open new markets for Lebanese products.

In this transformation, **youth are at the center**. They bring digital tools, renewable energy solutions, and entrepreneurial spirit. A young farmer today is just as likely to operate a smartphone app for irrigation as to drive a tractor. And this is the future we must embrace.

Allow me here to express our deep gratitude to **CIHEAM**. Since its establishment more than 60 years ago, and since Lebanon joined in 1992, CIHEAM has invested in **Lebanese human capital at all levels**:

- Through **academic programs** that have trained over 1,500 Lebanese students in Bari, Montpellier, Zaragoza, and Chania.
- Through **research partnerships** that have advanced knowledge in water management, agri-food systems, rural development and rural women empowerment.
- Through **development projects** that have directly supported farmers, cooperatives, and institutions across Lebanon.

For Lebanon, CIHEAM is not only an international organization. It is a partner, a supporter, and a friend. This seminar is living proof of that — bringing together alumni, experts, and stakeholders to chart a shared way forward.

Allow me to extend a special word of gratitude and a very warm welcome to the CIHEAM family — the President the Secretary General Professor Teodoro Miano , the Delegate of Italy to the CIHEAM Governing Board, and the Directors of the four Institutes. Your presence here in Lebanon, especially in these challenging

times, is not only a gesture of solidarity but also a powerful proof of your faith in this country, in its people, and in the value of our shared Mediterranean cooperation. We deeply appreciate your commitment and the efforts you have made to make this event happen and to join us today.

Dear friends,

To truly unlock the potential of youth in shaping the future of Lebanon's agri-food systems, we must also look at the broader ecosystem of partners who make this possible.

- **Educational institutions** have a duty to equip young people with modern skills, through updated curricula and stronger bridges between universities, technical schools, and the labor market.
- **The private sector** must open its doors, offering internships, mentorships, and job opportunities that allow young graduates to apply their knowledge and creativity in real-world settings.
- **Research centers and development organizations** should continue to provide space for innovation, giving young researchers the tools to design solutions adapted to Lebanon's unique challenges.
- And of course, **government and public institutions** have the responsibility to create an enabling environment, with policies that attract investment, encourage entrepreneurship, and ensure fair opportunities for smallholders and startups alike.

It is only through this shared responsibility — with youth at the center but supported by all stakeholders — that Lebanon's agri-food systems can become more resilient, more competitive, and more sustainable.

Looking ahead, Lebanon is determined to deepen its collaboration with CIHEAM and its member states. Together, we look forward to:

- Strengthen **academic exchanges and scholarships**, ensuring more Lebanese youth access Mediterranean knowledge networks.
- Scale up **joint research projects**, particularly on water, renewable energy, agroecology, and food safety.
- Support **development initiatives** that empower farmers, promote cooperatives, and expand market access.
- Build a **Lebanese Alumni Network** as a permanent platform for knowledge-sharing, mentoring, and innovation.

Excellencies, dear friends

The agri-food sector in Lebanon is at a crossroads. It can remain vulnerable, or it can become the driver of recovery, resilience, and sustainable growth. The choice lies in our collective action.

I am confident that with the energy of our youth, the support of our partners — especially CIHEAM — and the commitment of our institutions, we can chart a new path: a path where Lebanese agriculture feeds our people, sustains our land, empowers our youth, and connects us ever more strongly with our Mediterranean family.

I thank CIHEAM once again for its unwavering support, and I thank all of you — alumni, experts, and friends — for being here today.

Let us invest in youth. Let us transform our food systems. And let us build together a resilient and sustainable future for Lebanon and the Mediterranean.

Thank you.