

## **CIHEAM - Lebanese Alumni Reports**

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# Executive Summary

Across the four panels of the CIHEAM-Lebanese Alumni discussions, participants conveyed a shared and consistent message: Lebanon has strong human capital and significant potential in the agrifood sector, but progress depends on narrowing the persistent gap between academic training and real field needs. Although universities produce capable graduates, many still find themselves unprepared for the practical, technical, and institutional challenges that farmers, companies, and public bodies face on the ground. The panels agreed that the country needs professionals who combine solid technical knowledge with transversal abilities such as critical thinking, communication, digital skills, sustainability awareness, and the capacity to work across disciplines.

A recurring theme was the need to make education more practical, collaborative, and aligned with the needs of the agrifood system. This includes co-designed curricula involving the private sector and public institutions, meaningful internships, “living labs,” and early exposure to emerging tools such as AI, robotics, and traceability systems. Participants also stressed the importance of completing and enforcing key national legislation on food safety, pesticides, forestry, and environmental protection, as a necessary foundation for any real transformation of the sector.

Innovation emerged as one of Lebanon’s strengths. The panels highlighted several Lebanese entrepreneurial initiatives that have translated creativity and scientific knowledge into practical solutions: biodegradable edible coatings, AI-based quarry monitoring, precision-agriculture drones, new food products developed through university incubators, and the digitisation of farm processes. These examples demonstrate the potential that already exists, while also revealing the need for more support mechanisms such as financial tools, risk-sharing, and stronger collaboration between universities and companies. Retaining talent and encouraging MSc and PhD graduates to return with viable projects were identified as strategic needs.

Climate resilience and research-to-policy translation were also central topics. Agriculture, being highly vulnerable to climate change, requires transdisciplinary thinking and better use of scientific evidence in policy-making. The panels presented concrete examples: redesigned greenhouses, innovative irrigation systems in the Bekaa, remote sensing for land and water management, systems combining sensors and solar energy, and environmental mapping such as fire-risk assessments. However, limited data availability, institutional fragmentation, and a culture of competition continue to restrict the impact of research on national agricultural and environmental strategies.

The Alumni Panel added an important human dimension. Many alumni described their CIHEAM experience as transformative: academically rigorous, professionally decisive, and personally enriching. The “CIHEAM bonus card,” the strong and enduring alumni network that opens doors

across countries and institutions, was repeatedly mentioned. Alumni emphasised their willingness to act as mentors, to support young professionals, and to contribute to Lebanon's development even when based abroad. They called for a visible and trusted Alumni Platform capable of fostering collaboration, strengthening CIHEAM's presence in Lebanon, attracting partnerships, and reflecting the organisation's long-standing involvement in the country.

Overall, the panels converged around a shared conclusion: modernising Lebanon's agrifood sector requires practical and forward-looking education, stronger connections between research and policy, support for entrepreneurship, coordinated action among institutions, and the activation of a dynamic CIHEAM Alumni Network. Together, these elements can help build a more resilient, innovative, and inclusive agrifood system—one that corresponds to Lebanon's potential and contributes to its long-term development.

# PANEL 1 : Bridging the Skills Gap: Education and Training for Future Agrifood Systems transformation

Moderator: **Teodoro Miano**, CIHEAM Secretary General

Rapporteur (and Panelist): **Lara Hanna Wakim**, USEK University, Lebanon

Panelists : Dr **Nadine Nassif**, Dean, Faculty of Agriculture Dean Lebanese University, Mr. **Rafael Debbaneh**, private sector, Dr **Tala Awada** , University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Alumni of CIHEAM Chania, Mr. **Elie Massoud**, Alumni of CIHEAM Montpellier, Dr. **Nasser Yassine**, Former Minister

## Key Insights

### 1. Context and Challenges

The discussion began by acknowledging the current context: Lebanon's 2015 Food Safety Law remains incomplete without its implementing decrees. Despite producing qualified graduates, universities still face a gap between academic training and field realities. Smallholder farmers continue to lack social protection, secure land tenure, and reliable access to markets.

### 2. A Holistic Transformation

Panelists agreed that there is a need for a new generation of "T-shaped" agri-food professionals. This means combining deep technical expertise — in areas like crop production, food technology, and climate resilience — with transversal skills: critical thinking, communication, ethics, sustainability, and innovation.

### 3. Partnerships and Practical Training

The urgency of bridging academia with practice was highlighted. This includes co-designing curricula with private companies and public bodies, embedding real-world internships, creating "living labs," and ensuring students learn through hands-on exposure to robotics, data-driven tools, and field trials.

### 4. Legislative and Institutional Reform

Participants strongly urged the completion and enforcement of existing laws on food safety, pesticides, environment, and forestry. They emphasised the need for ministries to align national strategies with academic research and private innovation. It was also suggested that continuous

education, programmes like Erasmus and lifelong learning should integrate new tools like AI, traceability and ESG reporting.

## 5. Youth and Women's Engagement

Empowering youth and women is central. Training in business planning, access to finance, and export readiness must go hand in hand with exposure to agri-tech careers. International placements can build adaptability and encourage young professionals to see agriculture as a viable, modern career path.

## 6. The Role of CIHEAM and Alumni

The role of CIHEAM and alumni networks was underlined: to deliver specialized postgraduate programs, balance research with evidence-based evaluation, and inform policy while driving innovation hubs and securing tailored EU-funded projects.

## Conclusion

The consensus is clear: Only a coordinated, farmer-to-table approach - spanning legislation, education, private-public partnerships, and lifelong learning - can modernize Lebanon's agri-food sector and build the resilient, ethical professionals we urgently need.

## **Policy Implications, for Lebanon and the Mediterranean Region**

- Complete and enforce national laws on food safety, pesticides, environment, and forestry, and ensure that implementation is linked with education and training reforms.
- Strengthen the link between universities, ministries, and the private sector to make training more practical and competence-based.
- Encourage shared regional standards for internships and lifelong learning across CIHEAM Institutes, including modern tools such as AI, traceability, and ESG reporting.

## **Follow-up actions for MoA and National Institutions**

- In a ministry level, (MoA and Ministry of Higher Education) to continue working with universities and the private sector on linking academic programmes with field practice through internships and "living labs."
- National Institutions (like CNRS and LARI) to strengthen collaboration with ministries so that the research results are better integrated in agricultural and environmental policies.

- Universities to integrate transversal, digital, and sustainability skills in agrifood curricula, in line with the evolving national and regional priorities.

## **PANEL 2, Harnessing Innovation and AI to Drive Youth Entrepreneurship in Agrifood Sectors**

Moderator: **Raul Compes**, Director CIHEAM Zaragoza, Spain

Rapporteur (and Panelist): **Chariton Kalaitzidis**, Division Head, CIHEAM Chania, Greece

Panelists: Dr. **Samar Azzi**, Professor, USEK, Lebanon, Dr. **Nasser Yassin**, Policy Scientist, Former Minister of Environment, Lebanon, Mr. Ramy Boujawdeh, Managing Partner, FERMENDOM, France & Lebanon, Mrs. **Theresa EL Chahrouk El Maalouf**, Program Officer-Berytech, Lebanon.

### **Key Insights**

#### 1. Examples of Innovation in the Private Sector

The panel showcased several innovative initiatives such as:

- Biodegradable edible coating developed by a Lebanese-American company, born out of crisis conditions, highlighting the importance of technical and financial support for startups.
- AI application for monitoring quarries, using satellite data. By this way, corruption issues which are still present, can be controlled.
- Vitamin drink startup created during the COVID-19 pandemic through a university incubation program and based on traditional methods of production.
- Drone technologies for precision application of pesticides and fertilizers.
- Laser-based weed removal, non-dairy product development, and farm processes' digitisation.

It was noted that many initiatives require specialised support in areas such as agronomy and finance, as their founders often come from diverse engineering or non-agronomic backgrounds. Furthermore, companies must be willing to take greater risks in supporting new entrepreneurs, while government support is essential to help mitigate those risks. Closer collaboration between universities and businesses is also needed, with more MSc students encouraged and supported to conduct applied research projects in partnership with companies.

## 2. Key Challenges and Enablers for Future Innovation

The panel emphasised on flexibility as a key principle for fostering innovation, with the need to avoid narrow thematic focuses. Another key factor identified was the retention and nurturing of talent within Lebanon and the broader region. The panellists underlined the importance of creating a supportive innovation ecosystem that not only encourages local talent to remain but also attracts those who have studied or worked abroad to return and contribute.

Ensuring fundamental infrastructure such as electricity and heating, levelling the playing field for new entrants, and providing targeted financial support were all cited as prerequisites for enabling entrepreneurial initiatives to thrive. The talent exists; it simply requires the right support and encouragement to unlock its full potential. Particular emphasis was placed on promoting the circular economy as a framework for sustainable innovation.

The potential of artificial intelligence was highlighted as well, with a call to adopt AI wherever possible.

To prepare young entrepreneurs for this evolving landscape, CIHEAM was encouraged to integrate human-centred design thinking into its educational offer and ensure that graduates develop a deep understanding of real-world problems. Furthermore, mechanisms should be created to support MSc and PhD graduates in returning to their home countries with viable entrepreneurial projects, a step seen as essential given the high unemployment rates among highly educated youth in the South-Mediterranean region.

Finally, strengthening alumni networks was identified as another enabler of innovation, offering a platform for knowledge exchange, mentorship, and collaboration.

## 3. AI-driven model of education

It was noted that the current alignment between graduates' skills and market needs remains suboptimal. There is a need for better integration of practical competencies and emerging technologies into educational pathways. Moreover, panellists stressed that investment in education must begin at earlier stages to build the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for innovation and entrepreneurship later on.

## 4. CIHEAM and Internship positions

One key point raised was that companies should be encouraged to offer more internship positions, providing students with opportunities to apply their knowledge in real work environments. It was suggested that CIHEAM could play an active role in lobbying and promoting such partnerships between its training programmes and the private sector. It was stressed that educational content

should be introduced earlier in academic pathways, with a stronger focus on multidisciplinary and on developing serious, research-oriented graduate theses that foster innovation and real-world problem solving.

## 5. The Way Forward and the CIHEAM's Role

In conclusion, the panel recognised the pivotal role that CIHEAM can play in bridging education, innovation, and entrepreneurship across the Mediterranean. By integrating human-centred design thinking into its curricula, encouraging multidisciplinary learning, and embedding practical, research-oriented projects at earlier academic stages, CIHEAM can better equip students to address real-world challenges. The Organisation could also foster stronger university-industry linkages, promote internship opportunities, and support mechanisms enabling MSc and PhD graduates to return to their home countries with viable entrepreneurship projects. In doing so, CIHEAM would continue to act as a catalyst for youth empowerment and sustainable innovation in the agrifood sector.

### **Policy Implications, for Lebanon and the Mediterranean Region**

- Strengthen connection between universities and private sector.
- Mitigate risks faced by young agrifood entrepreneurs.
- Support national strategies that facilitate the return and reintegration of MSc and PhD graduates with viable entrepreneurial projects.
- Enhance regional cooperation and knowledge exchange among Mediterranean countries to retain and nurture talent within the region.

### **Follow-up actions for MoA and National Institutions**

- Establishing internship frameworks linking agrifood startups with university programmes.
- Providing targeted financial support for enabling entrepreneurial initiatives to thrive.
- Strengthening alumni networks.
- Promoting AI and digital transformation in agri-entrepreneurship requires a national innovation policy linking MoA, MEHE, and investment institutions. CIHEAM's role can include technical guidance and linking Lebanese startups to regional innovation ecosystems.

# PANEL 3, Catalyzing Research and Innovation for Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Agriculture

Moderator: Dr. **Thierry Dupeuble**, Director CIHEAM Montpellier, France

Rapporteur (and Panelist): Dr. **Daniel El Chami**, Sustainable Strategy Director, *TIMAC AGRO Int., France*

Panelists: Dr. **Chadi Abdallah**, Secretary General, CNRS, Lebanon, Dr. **Nahla Hwalla**, Professor, American University of Beirut, Lebanon, Ms. **Nadine Khoury**, The Quinta Group, Lebanon, Dr. **George Mitri**, Director, Land & Natural Resources Program, University of Balamand, Lebanon.

## Key Insights

### 1. Innovation and Transdisciplinary Thinking

Innovation was presented as the practical application of science and knowledge to create ideas, products, and processes that deliver significant improvements and added value. It is rooted in lateral thinking, which enables creative and non-linear approaches to complex challenges. Sustainable development as a model ensures responsible economic prosperity for all and it is inherently transdisciplinary.

Climate change represents the most significant challenge in human history, posing a threat to human existence, and agriculture, a crucial sector for food security, is the most climate-dependent and, consequently, the most vulnerable to its effects.

Given that sustainable development is inherently transdisciplinary, innovation emerges as the most effective tool to deal with the complex and interconnected challenges of climate change, particularly its impact in agriculture.

### 2. CIHEAM's Role and Vision

With its longstanding experience in education, research, and cooperation, CIHEAM continues to build on its strong human capital to provide innovative responses to the pressing challenges of sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture.

The CIHEAM, with its international vision and heritage in education, research, and development can contribute meaningfully in addressing the impacts of climate change on sustainable agriculture in Lebanon.

### 3. Research, Policy, and Innovation in Action

Discussions showcased a range of collaborative projects linking academia, private sector, and public institutions. Examples included initiatives promoting sustainable food systems, technological innovation in irrigation, and remote sensing for water, land, and environmental management. These experiences highlighted how research findings can and should be translated into concrete policies, strategies, and operational solutions on the ground.

### 4. Key Challenges Identified

The panel identified several major challenges that need to be addressed to accelerate progress toward sustainable and resilient agriculture:

- Education and Research: modernise curricula and foster a stronger research culture.
- Cultural Conditions: promote creativity, collaboration, and merit-based recognition.
- Economic Framework: ensure policy coherence and infrastructure.
- Social Dynamics: strengthen inclusiveness, transparency, and stakeholder engagement.

### 5. Examples of research projects addressing challenges facing Lebanese agriculture today and their translation into practice.

Several research initiatives were presented that aim to address some of the most pressing challenges facing Lebanese agriculture today. Projects highlighted the importance of translating scientific knowledge into policies, strategies, and operational solutions on the ground. Examples included the need to review the current system and the development of sustainable food-based dietary guidelines. This could be beneficial for both human health and the planet, illustrating how nutrition can be utilised to mitigate climate change through a holistic “soil-to-soil” approach. Other initiatives focused on turning climate change challenges into opportunities, such as the redesign of greenhouses for social and environmental improvement and the promotion of innovative irrigation systems, enabling farmers in the Bekaa region to adopt more efficient water use practices. Additional projects combined modelling, field sensors, and solar systems to improve water use efficiency, reduce costs, and prevent overexploitation of groundwater. Conducting post-war damage assessments to inform ministries about agricultural losses is among priorities.

Projects such as degradation mapping and the national fire-risk strategy illustrate how research collaboration between universities and the CNRS can produce concrete environmental management tools. However, the lack of data availability, limited collaboration among stakeholders, and a prevailing culture of institutional competition continue to limit the effective use of research results in shaping agricultural and environmental policies.

## 6. Pathways for Strengthened Cooperation between CIHEAM and Lebanese institutions

Priority should be given to research funding and the establishment of joint research agendas responding to Lebanon's main agricultural and environmental challenges. This includes capacity-building initiatives such as PhD and postdoctoral programmes, internships, pilot demonstration sites and living labs linking research with application in the field. A policy interface should be developed to ensure that scientific results are translated into policy briefs, recommendations, and national strategies. Regional networking could also help position Lebanon as a bridge between the CIHEAM and the Arab research community. Participants underlined the importance of women's empowerment, innovation, and an entrepreneurial spirit, together with stronger collaboration between academia and the private sector, for instance through internship opportunities and joint projects. Finally, it was noted that multidisciplinary engagement, digitalisation, and agroecological co-creation are essential for sustainable transformation, with the CIHEAM Alumni Network acting as a potential driver and connector between institutions.

### **Policy Implications, for Lebanon and the Mediterranean Region**

- Strengthen the link between research, policy, and practice, ensuring that scientific knowledge and innovation are effectively translated into strategies and operational solutions on the ground.
- Promote transdisciplinary and innovation oriented approaches in national agricultural policies to address challenges of climate change and sustainability.
- Regional networking could also help position Lebanon as a bridge between the CIHEAM and the Arab research community.

### **Follow-up actions for MoA and National Institutions**

- Development of a policy interface to ensure that scientific results are translated into policy briefs, recommendations, and national strategies.
- The CIHEAM Alumni Network as a potential driver and connector between institutions.

## **PANEL 4, The Alumni Voice: Inspiring Journeys, Collective Impact, and Future Engagement**

Moderator: Dr. **Biagio Di Terlizzi**, Director CIHEAM Bari, Italy

Rapporteur: Mrs. **Virginia Lachana**, CIHEAM Coordinator of Education, France

Panelists: Dr. **Elia Choueiri**, Head, Department of Plant Protection, LARI, Lebanon, Dr. **Wadih Skaff**, Director ESIAM - USJ, Lebanon, Dr. **Kanj Hamade**, International Development Consultant, Dr. **Dani Fadel**, President, Lebanese Cannabis Regulatory Board, Lebanon, Mr. **Paul Skayem**, KFW Development Bank - Beirut, Lebanon, Ms. **Yara El Zoghbi**, Agricultural engineer and plant breeder, Lebanon

## Key Insights

*“This session is more than a moment of storytelling. It is a moment to reflect on a legacy of cooperation that has connected Lebanon and CIHEAM for decades, and to look forward to new ways of building collective engagement between our alumni and our institutes” (Dr. Biagio Di Terlizzi, opening of the Panel).*

### 1. CIHEAM’s Impact on Professional Journeys

For many alumni, the CIHEAM experience was described as transformative and even “life changing.” It offered exposure to international events and global networks, strengthened essential project management skills, and deepened understanding of the complex challenges in the agricultural and food sectors.

Beyond academic enrichment, the experience was personally rewarding and often remembered as “the best two years” of their lives. A key aspect was the so-called “CIHEAM bonus card”: an extensive alumni network that opens doors and creates opportunities across countries and institutions.

This combination of knowledge, skills, and connections, has led directly to new job opportunities and significant career achievements. As one alumnus remarked, “because of CIHEAM, today I have major accomplishments.”

### 2. Alumni as Mentors for the Next Generation

CIHEAM alumni have a unique potential to serve as mentors for the next generation of agricultural engineers and researchers. Drawing on their academic background and professional experience, they are well-positioned to bridge the gap between theory and real-world practice. By sharing insights, lessons learned, and practical advice, alumni mentors can help students and young professionals transition more smoothly from study to the workplace.

### 3. Linking Research to National Development

Research should create opportunities to contribute to Lebanon's development, even from abroad. The goal is to apply the knowledge and skills gained to address the country's challenges and support sustainable progress.

### 4. Building a Trusted and Visible Alumni Platform to Attract International Partnerships

The panel highlighted the importance of building a strong identity and a solid, unified Alumni platform to connect graduates and partners. This would boost visibility and facilitate attracting collaborations, funding and international partnerships. The presence and role of the CIHEAM Bari offices in Lebanon were also underlined as essential, supporting and facilitating such initiatives.

### 5. Attracting Partnerships, Funding, and Collaborative Projects in Lebanon

The discussion emphasized that attracting partnerships and collaborative projects in Lebanon requires a deep understanding of the local environment and the political dynamics. It is also important to highlight and valorize CIHEAM's interventions in the country, showcasing their impact and relevance. Bringing CIHEAM institutes together, as demonstrated by the Lebanese Alumni International Event in Beirut, strengthens visibility and collective action. Alumni themselves can play a key role by serving as CIHEAM's institutional memory, preserving and sharing the organization's history, values, and achievements. Participants also highlighted emerging opportunities in high-value and regulated sectors such as industrial cannabis, where research, policy development, and private investment intersect. This example illustrates how CIHEAM alumni can contribute to advancing evidence-based policies, promoting new agricultural value chains, and ensuring that innovative sectors align with Lebanon's agrifood strategy and international regulatory standards.

### 6. Bridging Research and Policy in the Agrifood System

Bridging the gap between research and policy is essential to building a resilient, innovative, and sustainable agrifood system. This requires multidisciplinary training, giving professionals the skills to address challenges across agriculture, technology, environment, and society. This is complemented by expertise in rural development, ensuring that policies and innovations directly respond to the needs of local communities and contribute to inclusive growth. Moreover, the agrifood system operates at the intersection of public and private sectors as well as international stakeholders. Strong collaboration among these actors is essential for translating research outcomes into actionable policies.

## 7. Lessons from Other Alumni Associations for Building a Sustainable CIHEAM Alumni Structure, and One Concrete Collective Action for the Future.

Learning from successful alumni models contributes to building a sustainable CIHEAM Alumni network. Valuable models can be found in several existing alumni networks like the “Lebanese Collegiate Network”.

To strengthen CIHEAM’s alumni network, several actions can be prioritized, like:

- **Mentorship Programs:** Establish structured mentorship opportunities that connect current students with alumni, promoting knowledge transfer and career development.
- **Alumni Network Committee:** Create a dedicated committee to coordinate initiatives, and maintain regular communication.
- **Institution-Centered Support:** Design the alumni network to support CIHEAM’s mission and development, focusing not only on alumni interests but also on how they can contribute back to the institution.
- **AI-Driven Networking:** Use artificial intelligence tools to facilitate networking, and externalize certain aspects of network development. One key advantage of this approach is the possibility of implementing anonymous selection procedures, ensuring fairness and transparency.

### Concluding Remarks

CIHEAM alumni are not only individual success stories, but also a powerful collective resource for Lebanon and the wider Mediterranean. By joining forces through a structured Alumni Network, even starting virtually, we can create a living platform for visibility, solidarity, mentorship, and collaboration. This is not just about staying in touch; it is about working together, aligning with the CIHEAM 2030 Strategic Plan, and ensuring that alumni remain at the heart of innovation, resilience, and transformation in agrifood systems.

This panel reminds us always, that CIHEAM Alumni is the most living and dynamic capital of the Organization.

*“The Alumni Network is a platform for visibility, solidarity, mentorship, training, and job opportunities for the support and resilience of the alumni that decided to live in their country” (Dr. Biagio Di Terlizzi, closing of the Panel).*

## **Policy Implications, for Lebanon and the Mediterranean Region**

- Support the creation of a structured and visible alumni platform to attract collaborations, funding and international partnerships.
- Highlight and valorise CIHEAM's long-term contribution to national development

## **Follow-up actions for MoA and National Institutions**

- Building a trusted and visible Alumni Platform.
- Launch a mentorship programme linking alumni with students and young professionals.