Environmental Education for Sustainable Development in Arab Countries is the topic of the 2019 annual report of the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED). It provides the first comprehensive survey of environmental contents in school and university curricula across the Arab countries, in view of identifying gaps and recommending pathways to enhance the role of education in advancing environmental protection and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This report comes as a natural continuation of the series of annual reports on the state of the Arab environment, launched by AFED in 2008. It highlights the role of education in building new generations empowered with adequate knowledge, which enables them to address the challenges that emerged from the eleven previous reports. AFED’s first annual report in 2008, entitled Arab Environment: Future Challenges, became a major reference in its field and was the launching pad for the reports that followed, covering ten topics: Climate Change (2009), Water (2010), Green Economy (2011), Ecological Footprint (2012), Sustainable Energy (2013), Food Security (2014), Sustainable Consumption (2015), Sustainable Development in a Changing Arab Climate (2016), The Arab Environment in 10 Years (2017) and Financing Sustainable Development (2018). Implementing solutions to the challenges traced in the reports requires enhanced public awareness and sufficient scientific knowledge, which is exactly where the role of education comes into play.

The report found that during the last decade, Arab universities witnessed a rapid increase in programs related to the environment and sustainable development. Collectively, the 57 universities surveyed offer 221 degree programs on environmental topics. Postgraduate programs are typically research-oriented. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been found to be the most active in environmental research output. The report noted that Arab universities can further accelerate their contribution to sustainability by integrating all of the SDGs into their learning and teaching activities, research, and community initiatives, observing specific weakness in the domains of environmental law and green economy.

One pivotal recommendation of the report is offering an introductory course on environment and sustainability to all fresh university students.

An AFED survey of school textbooks and curricula found that environmental topics most popular in Arab schools are ecosystems, natural resources, pollution and sustainable development. In contrast to the inclusion of the rather new topic of sustainable development, the survey found that climate change was absent or not adequately discussed in 40 percent of the countries. Some countries, which developed the most comprehensive programs to integrate environment in school curricula, were, paradoxically, slow in implementation, such as Egypt and Lebanon. In general, lack of coordination between ministries of environment
and education was observed, which often resulted in overlapping programs. The report recommended that big challenges facing the region, such as water scarcity, desertification, drought, marine pollution and dangers of sea-level rise due to climate change have to become a central part of the curricula.

Education is a major driver for a shift to a more sustainable lifestyle that ensures harmony with nature and a balanced use of resources. It also equips those entrusted with executing change with the necessary working tools and appropriate knowledge. Education has the power to nurture empowered, engaged and skilled citizens who can map the way towards a balanced, greener and safer planet.

Human behavior has led to environmental crises with various outcomes, including overpopulation, unsustainable lifestyles that consume more resources than what can be replenished, and individual behavior that harms the environment such as using polluting forms of energy or producing excessive waste. Environmental education has a key role in addressing those environmental challenges. It can be used to mitigate specific environmental issues and respond to their impact, but also to address the behavior that causes them. It can influence individual and collective environmental behavior, it enhances people’s resilience to climate-related risks, and it also encourages their support for and involvement in mitigation actions. However, Environmental Education not only increases knowledge and awareness but also improves skills and enables individuals to make better, more environmentally informed decisions and devise solutions based on solid science.

AFED wishes to thank all institutional partners who made this report possible, by sharing their experiences and work in the domain of Environmental Education. Our academic partners included the University of Bahrain, Institute of Environmental Studies and Research at Ain Shams University, American University of Beirut, Arabian Gulf University and University of Petra. Chemonics Egypt joined as main research partners. Other institutions contributed case studies and papers, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP-MAP) and the Lebanese Center for Educational Research and Development

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This report uses science-based evidence to trigger a needed policy debate on the urgency of reforming the Arab education systems in order to mainstream environmental issues in their curricula. It is thus hoped that it will assist in enhancing the role of education as a driver for better environmental management, as well as for advancing sustainable development in the Arab region.

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Najib Saab
Secretary General
Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED)