

MARIAM AL MHEIRI

Minister of Climate Change and Environment of the United Arab Emirates

Jean-Michel Severino, President of Investisseurs & Partenaires, former Director General of the French Development Agency, former Vice President for Asia at the World Bank

Basically, we pay little political attention to those issues, and this is why I am even happier to have with us a prestigious policymaker and a very specific one. As I said, you link in your role climate change and food security, which is quite interesting and I am sure that you can enlighten us, Minister, with your experience.

Mariam Al Mheiri

Thank you so much. I would like to start first by thanking the World Policy Conference for having us here and talking about a very important subject. I am sure a lot of you have heard me talking before and linking food systems with climate change is a must because, as some of my fellow panelists mentioned, a third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from our broken food systems. I feel a lot has already been said about the situation we are in, the shocking numbers and the challenges we have. I want to talk about solutions and the light at the end of the tunnel. I think the UAE is very well-known for being a beacon of hope, so I want to bring hope.

In my eyes, we need to do three things. Countries need to plan better when it comes to food systems transformations and, for each point I make, I will give you a bit of an example of what we do in the UAE. We have a national food security strategy, we have the Emirates Food Security Council that governs all the programs we are doing under the strategy to make sure we are implementing. We are also always checking how we are benchmarking ourselves internationally, so we are looking at the Global Food Security Index. By the way, this year the UAE became the number one ranking in the Global Food Security Index for the MENA region. This is because we have put a lot of effort into planning, understanding and improving. There are a lot of areas that need improvement, such as R&D, where we have to put more investment for innovation. This feedback we are getting is really important, so the planning is really important. Countries must plan because food security, which is not just agriculture by the way, is food and loss, waste, nutrition, food safety, the way we consume, what we buy in the supermarket, what ends up in the bin, that all has a huge influence on our food systems today. Most of us always think agriculture, agriculture but there is actually a huge part on the demand side as well and changing and reflecting on how we are consuming. Because I have been involved in the food system conversation over the last few years, I have changed a lot how I eat and tried to get my family to be influenced as well. By the way, the younger



generation is so much easier to influence, I am still working on the older generation. This is what is happening in my own family and household, so now think about how to do this in a community or a country, it is not easy.

Then I think of the second point, which a lot of you mentioned, investing in innovation. I am not just saying investing in innovation but also being innovative, so the word innovation is huge, and I will give you some examples. In the past years in Abu Dhabi for example, we have the Abu Dhabi Investment Office under the Ghadan 21 Initiative, which is an Abu Dhabi accelerator program. We have invested more than USD 150 million in ag tech companies to attract them to the UAE to start growing clean foods all year round in the hot, arid environment we are in. We are a water-scarce country, we do not have much arable land, and with that, we must turn to innovation. We are so proud today when you go to the supermarkets you see berries grown in the UAE, salmon, quinoa, vegetables of all sorts, fruits are coming up as well, and I am sure in the very near we are going to see grains being grown in closed-system farms. This is going to be a breakthrough, ladies and gentlemen, because this means we are not dependent on the climate around us, it is a closed farm where water is recycled, and you do not have to use chemicals. There must be more investments in these kinds of innovation, and we are doing this, and we need to do more. When I talk about being innovative, we are talking about ensuring that trade is open and without restrictions. By the way, the UAE is very dependent on global food supply, 90% of our food comes from outside. Now, I think how can I not put any restrictions and protect local production but still try to encourage local production to grow in a harsh environment? You have to innovate, so we did something just a few weeks ago during our annual government meetings. Every year, the UAE holds an annual government meeting where we bring all the federal and local entities together and discuss challenges. What we decided was government entities, the big consumers such as the police, the armed forces, hospital authorities, the ones that buy a lot of food and that are under government control, must buy locally. Let us not touch the trade, let the trade keep going, but where you have hands-on on your procurement and what you can buy, this is where you can encourage buying a certain percentage of certain food items locally. I call this innovation.

The third point is about partnerships. I keep saying partnerships, partnerships, partnerships, so let us look at an example. Bustanica is a vertical farm that is now operating in the UAE, one of the largest vertical farms in the world. This is a partnership with Emirates Catering Group, and I am sure many of you have flown with some of our national airlines, of which Emirates Airlines is one. You are now going to enjoy salads from this vertical farm, it is now more commercially viable and more profitable for Emirates Catering Group to get its greens, micro greens, lettuce, salads, from these vertical farms in the UAE, rather than importing them. The business model is changing, and this is a partnership between Emirates Catering Group and Crop One, a company from the US. We also have a lot of ag tech companies in the UAE we are supporting because we are really supporting the ag tech ecosystem and they are now going out to Singapore, for example, to try to build the ecosystem there. Basically, we are now trying to show other countries facing these challenges how technologies from the UAE, a hot, arid climate, work in this space.

These are the three key areas: plan, innovation – investing or being creative and innovative –, and partnerships. For me, this is what countries must look into. It is also so important that during the COP28, as much as people are talking about the energy and the just energy



transition, food systems transformation must also be on center stage with the energy transformation discussions. It is really important, and this is what we are doing because the UAE is really taking COP28 as a country effort and we are all trying to put everything together because everything is interlinked: water, energy, food, waste. Hopefully, we will see many of you there as well next year, where we are really linking all this together and showcasing projects and solutions that work. Remember, friends, things need to be easy, every country has different challenges and certain resources that others do not, which is why it is so complex. Solutions are there, you will be surprised by how many innovations and solutions there are that can really fix the broken systems we are in today. We have to do the matchmaking, have the discussion, have the partnerships, AIM4C is another one we are very proud of where the UAE and the US have spearheaded the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate. We have about 275 partners onboard, more than USD 8 billion of commitment into this food systems transformation, so we need to see a lot more of these things happening.

Jean-Michel Severino

Thank you very much, Minister, for so brilliantly introducing us to the very structure way you have addressed the challenge of having to import most of your food and working on this very structured policy around planning, innovation, and partnerships which I think is very inspiring. You also addressed the question of demand and in Danone my colleagues have a very strong policy around saying that the best people can change the world is by changing the way you eat. Of course, they think they have the products that can help you do that, but there is something very true in that and many of our responses are there. As you so rightly said, innovation is something that is often underestimated and I will just briefly share with you that, even in the poorest African countries, incredible innovations are taking place. With MyShop in Senegal we are funding a wonderful start-up on baby nutrition using only local products. In Burkina Faso we are funding another start-up that is using and raising worms for protein for production, completely changing the way a poor country can access protein. In Kenya we are funding vertical agriculture, which is also one of the ways one can change the issue of land availability. A lot of things are taking place that can also provide hope so thank you very much for sending this signal of hope.