Reichman University Arison ESG Center
Environmental. Social. Governance

AgFood 2025

Hello, dear friends,

I thank you for the opportunity to stand here at an extraordinary conference – not only because of its themes, but because of the spirit it conveys. A spirit of women's entrepreneurship, of food innovation, of action with social and environmental value – and especially of a systemic vision for the future.

I come here as someone who grew up in the financial system, supervised the banking system, and today, among other things, I head the advisory committee in academia of Arison Center of ESG that deals with the environment, society and government.

This combination of markets, regulation, and values requires us to ask deep questions about economic structures, national resilience, and the connections between them.

And if there is one area where all these threads intersect – it is the world of the AgFood.

In recent decades, the world of AgFood has turned from a fascinating scientific world into a real strategic focus.

Today, it includes not only agriculture – but also artificial intelligence, biotechnology, data, robotics, logistics infrastructure, and innovative business models.

What starts in the ground – goes through global supply chains, sensors in the field, code in labs, digital retail – and ends with each and every one of us.

In other words, AgFood is not just a segment – it is an infrastructure. An infrastructure for life, an infrastructure for growth, and an infrastructure for national security.

When we deal with national security, food security is an integral part of it. Food security is not just a social concept – it is a matter of foreign policy, of internal security and of economics.

I can say it firmly - a country that does not control its food sources depends on the mercy of others.

Dealing with national security, climate change, geopolitical tensions, pandemics, and extreme events create permanent disruptions in the global food system.

To ensure stability for the citizens, stability for businesses, and political stability, it is necessary to invest in innovative food infrastructure.

This is where agrotechnological innovation, precision agriculture, alternative proteins, vertical farming and data management come into play – these are no longer future solutions, but the necessity of the present.

These concepts correspond closely with entrepreneurship, innovation, and development, and all of these require funding for their existence and development.

But specifically in fields such as Agfood – financing is sometimes complex (probably a rather "laundered" word). Technologies take time to mature, markets are constantly changing, regulation is sometimes unsupportive – all of which make it difficult for investors to understand the potential for risk and return.

To bridge this gap, there is room for a new kind of initiative. A combination of public and private financing, dedicated investment funds with ESG indices, agricultural innovation insurance, and a smart connection between commercial banking, venture capital, and regulation.

In other words, you need not only good ideas – but also financing infrastructures that recognize the unique nature of the AgFood field with its economic, environmental and social advantages. It is clear to me, and to my great regret, that there is a certain failure in the pricing of values beyond the immediate economic values – meaning taking into consideration the 'Externalities', without taking into account the objective difficulty in innovation, the difficulty of reaching scale, and so on.

And a few words about gender.

This conference is proudly led by women entrepreneurs – and this is not a coincidence, but a model. The integration of women in entrepreneurship and decision-making is an economic and technological interest. Research shows that women entrepreneurs tend to establish ventures that are focused on the real needs of communities. They link scientific knowledge to community uses, tradition and innovation, and practice and ethics.

In a field like Agfood, where the connection between the land, society, the consumer and the digital market is so delicate – an integrative female voice is critical.

The question is not just how many women participate – but where they decide, where they set policy, and where they take ownership of economic value.

As Chair of the Advisory Board of the Arison Center for ESG, and as someone who in recent years has been working to promote gender equality and the perception of climate risk management in the Banking industry, I have to say a few words about the values of the environment, society, and governance – ESG – when in my view these have turned from a marginal factor into a central flag, despite the winds of resistance that have arisen from the West.

It is important to say. ESG isn't just about value – it's a tool for managing opportunities and managing risk.

The main message is that we must rise above and integrate the worlds of ESG into the core of our organizations. It is not enough to meet minimum reporting requirements; We need to embed ESG principles deep into our corporate missions, visions, and strategic goals.

This commitment should not be a separate appendix, but rather a fundamental aspect of the organization's identity and strategy. The vision must encompass a future where the organization plays a positive role in social and environmental progress, with the strategic plan including clear success metrics linking sustainability and value creation.

Hence, incorporating sustainability into our business strategy requires a holistic approach. We must consider the environmental, social, and economic impacts of our actions and seek innovative solutions that address these dimensions. Collaboration will be key – both within our organization and with external partners. By leveraging our collective expertise and resources, we can drive meaningful change and set new benchmarks for sustainability in our industry.

Shareholders, board members, and senior management who play key roles should be expected to work implementing sustainability as part of the organizational strategy. Their leadership and oversight are essential in setting the tone from above, ensuring that sustainable practices are prioritized at all levels of the organization.

Boards of directors today need to look at environmental and social impacts as much as financial performance and make decisions from this broad perspective. In practice, this means that boards of directors and managements need to considerably increase their observation and engagement, and in addition to the more traditional tasks, they need to broaden their minds and discussion into issues such as land use, energy, water and emissions; human rights, equal opportunity and diversity; as well as ethics and other internal standards that apply not only within the organization, but also about the organization's supply chain.

In the field of AgFood, environmental risks – such as the collapse of irrigation systems, soil pollution or over-dependence on pesticides – are operational risks for all intents and purposes. The same applies to social risks – such as harm to seasonal workers or ignoring the cultural needs of consumer communities.

Those who internalize and assimilate from the initial stages of initiation and idea will increase the probability that they will be the ones who will receive funding, partners, and trust from the market.

It is important to mention at this event that the framework in the ecosystem, the government and the public sector play an important role. The state is not the developer – but it is the one that sets the course.

The government has clear roles:

- to set a national goal for food and technological security
- support applied research
- to create smart regulatory frameworks – that do not stifle innovation, but create certainty in it
- ensure access to funding through public-private collaborations

The public sector should serve as a catalyst – not only of budgets, but also of policy: to remove barriers, to connect bodies, and to ensure that the market works for the benefit of society as a whole.

And like other areas of industry, the AgFood field is not isolated. It is influenced by transportation, infrastructure, education, trade, health. The field is part of a large system and large systems are exposed to risks.

To deal with systemic risks – such as climate change, wars, or pandemics – brilliant technological solutions are not enough.

There is a need for continuous cooperation between sectors:

- academia will connect to industry
- the government will know how to work with the private sector
- civil society should be a partner in the design
- the financial system will not only finance, but direct investments to the right places

As I mentioned in the introduction – the 21st century AgFood is no longer a segment – it is a compass.

It asks us - how can we live on a warming, changing, and polarized planet without losing control of the most basic resource – food?

And he answers are - through innovation, responsibility, collaboration, and investment in people.

Therefore, I appeal to all of you –

- the entrepreneurs: dare, insist, join forces with complementary forces
- the investors: Invest in AgFood not as philanthropy – but as an investment in the anchor of the future
- the government: Lead a policy that sanctifies food security and innovation
- all of us as a society: see food not only as a biological need – but as an element of stability, justice, and growth

I call on you, as leaders, to embrace this transformative challenge with unwavering determination. Let us not just be observers, but the architects of a sustainable future.

Our legacy will be measured not by the deals we broker or the profits we make, but by the impact we have on the planet and our society.

The time for hesitation has passed.

Opportunities for change are at our fingertips. Every action we take is a step toward a resilient economy and a better world.

History will remember us not because of the challenges we faced, but because of the transformative choices we made under pressure – as a force of hope, innovation, and positive change.

Together, let us lead boldly. Let us be the vanguard of a future where prosperity and sustainability are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing.

Yair Avidan, Chairman of the Advisory Committee, Arison Center of ESG, Reichman University