H.E. Minister of State for Administrative Reform Nabil de Freij,
H.E. Minister of State for the Parliamentary Affairs Hajj Mohammad Fneish,
Representative of H.E. Minister of Agriculture Akram Shehayeb, Anwar Daou.
President of the Regional Union of Cooperatives in South Lebanon Salim Mrad,
Representative of the Institute for University Cooperation Claudio Errighi,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today in South Lebanon, this beautiful part of the country, to inaugurate the olive oil collection centre. What better place to savour Lebanon's olive oil and to get a taste of the richness of the country's culinary tradition than here in the South. So today, we are not only inaugurating an olive oil
collection centre, but also celebrating tradition, craftsmanship and the richness of Lebanon's land.

The European Union has supported the rehabilitation of this centre through the AFKAR III programme in the belief that it will yield concrete results by enhancing the production and marketing processes. I hope that today will be the beginning of a successful new era of olive oil production in this area.

Olive oil is amongst the most prominent Lebanese signature agro-industrial products. There are around 12 million olive trees in Lebanon, which occupy 22% of the Lebanese cultivable land. The sector employs more than 100 000 people and is therefore vital for the economy. Exports of olive oil have been on an upward trend over the last four to five years. This is very promising. However, we still need to tap into the full potential of this sector and efforts are needed to enhance olive oil production in line with international standards. I am confident that the rehabilitation of this centre will have a positive impact on olive oil production in Lebanon and will be a contributing factor towards gaining wider access to the European market in addition to traditional destinations – the Arab markets.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The partnership between Lebanon and the European Union is helping Lebanon meet its key systemic challenges by addressing urgent needs, as well as structural issues over the medium and long term. The success we are witnessing today is a reflection of the direct response of the European Union and the Member States to many of the major needs of the people living in this country. It is a reflection of the priorities identified in the new Action Plan agreed upon between European Union and the Lebanese Government: Agriculture is among the priority sectors where the European Union has the necessary expertise and experience to have a substantial impact.
Let me share with you one example of the results of European Union support to the agriculture sector in Lebanon: in 2013, Lebanese farmers, with the support of the European Union and the Member States and under the guidance and control of the Ministry of Agriculture, succeeded in improving the sanitary quality of Lebanese potatoes and of the supply chain. As a result, the European Commission took the decision to allow Lebanon to have a derogation from the general ban on the import of potatoes to the European Union. This has opened large commercial opportunities to profit the Lebanese farmers who will also benefit from all facilities for exportation of products as negotiated under the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (e.g. duty free quota).

The agro-business will also be among the key sectors targeted by the European Union in its next private sector development programme. The aim will be to increase micro and medium-sized enterprises' productivity and their participation in the economy. Improving the competitiveness of small farmers and reducing poverty are the key objectives of the new programme.

Recently, the European Union called on all its partners in the region to contribute towards a review of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This is a good opportunity for our partners here in Lebanon to have a say in the future of their relations with the European Union, and in the scope and principles of the ENP. The recent political, economic and social developments in the region have increased the challenges we all face and make this review critical for defining the right ways to address the challenges effectively.

The public consultation is now open and will last until the end of June 2015. I take this opportunity to encourage active actors of civil society in Lebanon to participate in this consultation. Your voice will definitively help shape our future policies and actions in Lebanon and in the region.
Finally, I would like to reiterate that with the active support and commitment of the Lebanese Government, I hope that major achievements in ensuring the well-being of the people living in Lebanon can be reached. We have to succeed in our joint efforts to create jobs, to alleviate poverty in the country and to promote sustainable development.

مَبِرُوك for the inauguration of this centre.

Thank you very much.