

The Moroccan Approach: Integrating Cultural Preservation and Sustainable Development

Yossef Ben-Meir

There is a reality of poverty for most people in the Moroccan kingdom. Particularly in rural areas, human development is not occurring to the extent needed to give the majority of the public—particularly among women and youth—a real opportunity for an empowered future. However, at the same time, there is reason for hope that sustainable change for the people is possible. In Morocco, there are a number of human development programs and policies that are innovative and promote social solidarity. These participatory democratic initiatives are designed to catalyze development that prioritizes human needs.

For example, the Municipal Charter of Morocco requires the application of inclusive participatory community methods in project planning. This enables projects to address economic, environmental, and social factors and goals. Another example is Morocco's Decentralization Roadmap, designed to harness partnerships among public and private sectors at the national and regional levels to achieve locally identified development goals.¹ Even considering the chronic problems in their implementation and overall ineffective-

1. See King Mohammed VI, "Full Text of King's Speech on the Occasion of the 33rd Anniversary of the Green March," Cultural Website of the Sahara, 6 November 2008. www.sahara-culture.com/Western-Sahara/Morocco-resolved-to-engage-in-serious-talks-on-autonomy-as-final-solution-to-Sahara-dispute,-king-322-736-1613.aspx

Yossef Ben-Meir is a sociologist and the founder and president of the High Atlas Foundation, a Moroccan-United States nonprofit organization dedicated to participatory development.

ness, these and other national initiatives create a context where broad-based people's empowerment and growth is possible in Morocco. It also true that the nation is grappling with very poor implementation of strategic development programs, particularly when considering rural areas and a lack of basic agricultural and other human development investment.

An embodiment of Morocco's integrated development model approach is the way it chooses to preserve its diverse cultures. The kingdom's 2011 constitution details the country's cultures and ethnicities, past and present. In Morocco, the preservation of cultural institutions, locations, and artifacts also includes the intention to enhance the lives of people in measurable ways, such as in education, income, and health. Cultural activities are to be advanced simultaneously and in tandem with human development.

Since early in his reign, King Mohammed VI has championed the premise of integrating cultural initiatives and sustainable development into single movements. The kingdom's position in regard to the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, for example, embodies the natural chemistry of actions that are both multicultural and developmental, to improve cooperation among nations. Mohammed VI explained in 2008, "That vision consists in making sure culture serves as a driving force for development as well as a bridge for dialogue."² It is the community and multicultural dialogue that leads to development becoming a driving force, uplifting the unfolding cultural relationships.

Methodology

The primary methodology for data gathering in this essay is direct observation and, in some cases, the author's participation in the cultural and development projects and programs discussed. Community data regarding the development priorities of the residents of the Marrakech *mellah* (Jewish quarter) was generated through the High Atlas Foundation's (HAF) facilitation of participatory methods, community mapping, and pairwise ranking.

2. King Mohammed VI, "Royal Message to Participants to a Symposium on Alliance of Civilizations," Maghreb Arab Press, 3 August 2008.

(The HAF is a Moroccan-US nonprofit organization of which the author is president.) The cultural-developmental projects analyzed are also considered within the context of Morocco's related national policies and strategies.

In addition, the evaluation of the multicultural projects' efficacy, the opportunities for preservation and development that they present, and challenges that they experience are based on a combination of the author's engagement with these initiatives as well as literature research. The purpose of the essay is to present (1) the Moroccan model for cultural preservation and recommendations for its improved implementation; (2) the ways this multidimensional strategy unfolds in a Moroccan experience, associated with the High Atlas Foundation in Essaouira and Marrakech; and (3) a pathway for other nations for multicultural action that improves people's livelihoods, education, health, and empowerment.

Community Nurseries on Land from the Moroccan Jewish Community

Morocco's national project to rehabilitate Jewish cemeteries was launched in 2012. There are approximately six hundred Hebrew "saints" buried in varied parts of the kingdom. Many have laid in rest for a millennium or more, and 167 of the sites have been part of a national restoration program that includes the preservation of graves and their immediate surroundings.³ Starting in Marrakech in 2012, the Jewish community began to lend land to the HAF near seven of the cemeteries, where the HAF could plant organic fruit-tree nurseries for the benefit of farming families and schools.

Most poverty in the nation (and in the world) exists in rural places. Moroccan farmers are transitioning from growing traditional barley and corn to more lucrative fruit trees—putting a very high demand on trees.⁴ According to Morocco's Agency for Agricultural Development, the staple grains are grown on about 70 percent of agricultural land, yet generate only 10–15 percent of agricultural revenue. Farming families—with small plots that bear

3. For more, see Molly McCluskey, "In the Restoration of Moroccan Jewish Cemeteries, Interfaith Calls for Peace," *Middle East Eye*, 19 November 2015.

4. For more, see Edward Barbier, *Natural Capital, Ecological Scarcity and Rural Poverty* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012).

much greater potential than what barley and corn generate—are deprived in education (particularly in secondary school), health infrastructure, and diversified local livelihoods. After primary school in many rural areas, for instance, less than half of the girls continue their formal education. Dormitories, clean water, and bathrooms would meet pervasive severe needs at rural schools. Across Moroccan provinces, drinking water is still the most common top priority of rural villages, but this is also true of some city neighborhoods (including the Marrakech mellah, as expressed by its residents). For the mountain communities, irrigation infrastructure would be transformative economically and environmentally, and for most rural communities it remains to be implemented. Employment opportunities for the majority of rural and urban youth are chronically scarce.

Farming families want to plant fruit trees as one of a series of measures necessary to end systemic rural poverty: processing product, cooperative-building, attaining greater market access, and securing organic and carbon credit certifications are also vital measures.⁵ Growing fruit trees from seedlings on land lent by the Moroccan Jewry and distributing them to marginalized rural communities not only helps meet a major development priority but also constitutes a multicultural (interfaith) action. The reinvigorated relationships between the Muslim farming families and Jewish community members leads to deepened appreciation among the beneficiaries of these historic cemetery places.⁶

It takes two years to grow tree saplings from seed, and Moroccan family farmers find it impossible to give up cultivation of their land for two years. The new land for community tree nurseries—from which the two-year-old saplings are transplanted into families' agricultural plots—overcomes the scarcity-of-land barrier to producing fruit trees in nurseries. Other in-kind land lenders to the HAF for community tree nurseries are from public and private agencies: The High Commission of Waters and Forests and the Fight Against Desertification, provincial offices of the Ministry of Education, universities, and cooperatives. Land contributions for successful community

5. Ibid.

6. Matthew Greene, "How a Jewish Cemetery Is Bringing a Moroccan Village to Life," *Middle East Eye*, 31 March 2016.

nurseries play an indispensable role in Morocco toward sustainable, organic, and integrated agricultural development.

The Moroccan Muslim-Jewish initiative generates goodwill due to enhanced food security and sustainable development for farming families and, in turn, increases social unity and further actions for cultural preservation. What maximizes the measure of solidarity (and sustainability), however, is that the farming communities themselves identified fruit trees as a project priority, as well as the varieties they prefer to grow. The project therefore responds to the expressed needs of the people and helps to deliver the results they seek. This illustrates how social benefits are maximized when people's participation is incorporated into the development-cultural process.

Outcomes of the Moroccan Muslim-Jewish Collaboration

In 2014, the pilot nursery on Jewish communal land was created near the village of Akrich, located in the Al Haouz province (twenty-five kilometers south of Marrakech), near the seven-hundred-year-old tomb of Rabbi Raphael Hacoen. In the past three years, 150,000 (33,000 in 2018) almond, fig, pomegranate, argan, carob, and lemon seeds were planted in the nursery and were transplanted to private plots once they matured into saplings. They are now grown by approximately 1,000 farmers and 130 schools in Morocco—entirely for the growers' benefit.

The pilot project's cost of \$60,000 was provided by Wahiba Estergard and Mike Gilliland, of Lucky's Market, and Jerry Hirsch with Lodestar Foundation. Then governor of Al Haouz province, Younes Al Bathaoui, coined this nursery initiative's name—House of Life—adopting the Hebrew name for a cemetery.⁷ Jacky Kadoch, president of the Jewish Community of Marrakech-Safi, was instrumental in granting this land and other parcels for ten years. Secretary General of the Jewish Community of Morocco Serge Berdugo enabled vital expansion of this land-for-tree nursery project.

In this example, the application of the Moroccan model for multicultural expression leading to human development is on display: the Jewish community provides the land for tree nurseries that are planted and maintained by

7. Kati Roumani, "Lending Land to Enhance Life," *Scoop Independent News*, 8 August 2015.

the local beneficiaries—farming families—with capital support from diverse sources, both domestic and international.

In 2016, the first trees from the Akrich pilot site were handed to local children and farmers by the governor, joined by the US ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco, Dwight Bush Sr. Earlier that year, Ambassador Bush hosted a reception for the House of Life project at his residence in Rabat, at which the advisor to the king, André Azoulay, and the Peace Corps director in Morocco, Ellen Paquette, spoke about the years of benefits for Morocco enabled by this work.⁸

The proposed second nursery was located beside the thousand-year-old tomb of Rabbi David ou Moché, in the province of Ourzazate in January 2018. The project's first year will see the construction of agricultural terraces. The new arable space will encompass one hectare, upon which will be grown, from 500,000 seeds, one-meter tall saplings of walnut, carob, fig, pomegranate, cherry, and almond. At maturity they will be given without charge to local associations, five thousand farming families, and two thousand schools. Some trees will be dedicated to addressing devastating erosion afflicting the immediate area. Together with partners, the HAF will monitor tree growth as part of securing carbon credits, the revenue from which will be invested in further tree planting.

Replication of nurseries across hundreds of parcels of land adjacent to the sites throughout the country would generate tens of millions of saplings and plants every year and a better life afforded to millions of people. The initiative could, and is, inspiring similar projects in the Middle East, with its combination of Muslim-Jewish collaboration and local-international and private-public partnerships. The Jewish community in Cairo now includes just six members, and their strategic approach to preserving their ancient cemetery is to promote the people's development surrounding it. Morocco's intercultural nursery project was also visited by Palestinian and Israeli groups and highlighted in media, and it could provide a pathway toward productive and deepened intercultural collaboration.

8. Yossef Ben-Meir, "A Paradigm Project for the Future: Location: Morocco," *Perspective*, 4 November 2016.

Revitalizing the Marrakech Mellah and Drawing from Experience in Essaouira

Historians suggest that the mellah in Marrakech first appeared during the second half of the sixteenth century. It is noteworthy that the kings of Morocco identify with an outlook that respects and strengthens Jewish continuity. This reflects the Moroccan national identity and the general perspective of the people. The mellah and its preservation is, in a sense, a natural outgrowth of Morocco's past and present. In regard to the human development dimension of the Marrakech mellah's rehabilitation, the initiative did serve to a degree as an economic stimulus by investing in the employment and materials necessary to reconstruct and enhance parts of the neighborhood.

Generally speaking, rebuilding infrastructure—if it involves local communities and incorporates their self-identified needs, consistent with the participatory approach—could then lead to measurable human development.⁹ Taking a participatory development perspective, however, there are questions to consider in the case of the mellah. How many local residents and their associations were involved in the planning of the rehabilitation of their neighborhood? How many residents were involved in the prioritization of the sites to be refurbished? Did the residents have a voice in creating the new designs of public areas?

As a way of comparison, in the Moroccan coastal city of Essaouira, inclusive community meetings—and the successful restoration in 2013 of the cemeteries of the three faiths and associated youth education—catalyzed new efforts to bring back a three-hundred-year-old Franciscan church. The local idea is that the rebuilt church, without a current large local worship community, could be restored as part of a UNESCO World Heritage site in accordance with the Moroccan cultural preservation model. At the same time, the church could provide much needed space for local civil society workshops and a display area for their crafts and innovations. The project directly links cultural preservation and advancing human development programs that will continue after reconstruction ends. By restoring the church and then it returning to civil organizations in support of their mission and

9. See Sudhir Anand and Amartya Sen, "Human Development and Economic Sustainability," *World Development* 28, no. 12 (2000): 2029–49.

work, Morocco presents an exceptional opportunity in the Middle East and North Africa to preserve a cultural heritage site and better meet the development needs of people today.

The proposed church restoration project for culture and civil society was given new organizational impetus as a result of HAF's 2013 project in Essaouira to preserve the cemeteries of the three religions. The program was funded by the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation and Essaouira Mogador. It integrated over four hundred individual students and schoolchildren into educational and practical activities around cultural knowledge preserved by the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cemeteries, and worked with over 120 members of local civil society. These local partners to "preserve the illustrious past of Essaouira for future generations," as Brian Shukan, the US consul general, described them at the close of project,¹⁰ brought new consideration to restore—for civil society and public benefit—the city's churches, mosques, zawiyas, synagogues, and religious schools.

Applying lessons from the tree nursery–cemetery preservation project and the Essaouira initiatives, there clearly needs to be much greater community participation in order for the mellah's restoration in Marrakech to be a real boon for sustainable development. The rebuilding of the mellah did not occur in conjunction with a groundswell of community planning meetings, at which the people might have participated and developed goals. The project does not reflect ongoing implementation driven by heightened social solidarity and new community-identified opportunities. There are not currently direct or indirect projects that have followed from people's broad participation that generate further cultural preservation and development investment. There is a notably low number of local civil associations and cooperatives. The people are in need of their own local organizations to act for their development. However, opportunities and the local community desire to analyze and achieve absolutely abound. Now it is about maintaining the momentum of planning and implementing projects and gaining resources for project costs.

10. Brian Shukan, "Report of the Closing Conference of the High Atlas Foundation's Project on Cemetery Preservation in Essaouira" (Essaouira, Morocco: High Atlas Foundation, 1 October 2013).

Facilitating Community Participation in the Marrakech Mellah

In order to help achieve a sustainable application of Morocco's cultural preservation-development model, the HAF, which is based in Marrakech, organized a series of community meetings starting in the summer of 2017, during Ramadan. During the first five community meetings with approximately 250 men and women, representatives of local civil organizations, the participatory methods of community mapping and PairWise ranking were applied. Community mapping helps participants "build a common understanding of the boundaries and characteristics of their community or neighborhood, and how everyone fits into it."¹¹ PairWise ranking is a tool that helps local people to identify "the needs of their group and to evaluate which are the most important to them."¹² Using this visually based methodology, the mellah residents improved their ability to determine and evaluate solutions to problems.

As part of incorporating the multicultural component into the initiative, the first two community meetings in the mellah were held during the holy month of Ramadan (26 May to 25 June 2017) at the four-hundred-year-old Slat Lazama Synagogue. The HAF partnered with Association Mimouna, a group of Moroccan Muslim students working to preserve the history of Morocco's ancient Jewish community. The partners helped organize F'tor (the meal breaking the fast at sundown) for local residents, held at the synagogue. The meal was followed by the mellah residents engaging with the participatory planning methods to determine their primary socioeconomic and environmental goals. The priority needs they identified are presented in table 1. Restoring a local mosque and transferring to civil society would meet a few of their top ten community needs by creating a space that is cultural and associational, for education and capacity-building.

In November 2017, the participating residents decided to focus on project priorities one and three: to create new jobs and opportunities for local women and youth and to mobilize to gain greater police presence and secu-

11. National Environment Secretariat, Clark University, Egerton University, and World Resources Institute, *Participatory Rural Appraisal Handbook* (Worcester, MA: National Environment Secretariat, Clark University, Egerton University, and World Resources Institute, 1991), 25.

12. *Ibid.*

Table 1. Project Priorities of Marrakech Mellah Residents, 2017

1	New enterprises with youth and women (including divorcees)
2	A kindergarten with green space, library, and sports space
3	Police station with consistent presence
4	Restructuring of homes (to include water pipes), affordable housing
5	Health clinic with regular presence of a doctor, a maternity wing Center for the rehabilitation of addicts
6	A tourist road linking Kasr Lbdiaa and Lmiaara House of Culture
7	Opening a closed mosque
8	Organizing the market and removing it from the dispensary
9	Space for associations to meet and work
10	A <i>hammam</i> (a traditional bathhouse)

ity, particularly at night. The next project development steps include identifying, together with technical and local leadership, precise project designs to meet these objectives. From there, written proposals will be developed and shared with relevant local, regional, and national government offices and other potential donors.

Conclusion

Morocco offers powerful and exemplary models for sustainable and shared growth, driven by the participatory method. Thankfully, the participatory approach is codified in its laws, policies, and programs. However, it is often a challenge to effectively achieve broad-based implementation in close accordance with the participatory vision that has been set forth to guide such actions. This is primarily because the skills to organize and facilitate local collaborative planning are not well enough dispersed, existing within an overall system of centralized decision making, which, however, is in some ways improving.

Morocco needs a corresponding management model to advance human development. Central to a new model for implementation is training members of civil organizations, local government, teachers, and local residents—the members of society who interface with communities—in facilitating participatory democratic methods for planning and managing development projects.

And here, training is most effective when people learn by doing, through applied experiences.¹³ Engaging with university students in real community settings is vital, so that they facilitate participatory methods as a research approach and for project development. A key take-away from the HAF's seven university partnerships—the first having begun in 2008 at the Faculty of Law in Mohammedia—is that the function of organizing community meetings and participation is ongoing. The coordinating, third-party role catalyzes and helps sustain development processes. However, once established, this position should diminish over time, as local capacities take over.

Morocco is a country of hope because of its traditions and commitment to multiculturalism and sustainability. In a sense, Morocco's challenge is that of all nations that are guided by practical ideals: to conscientiously embody, act by act, the progressive values that are intended to plot the course of national development now and in the future. However, even with this enormous and even unique opportunity, sustainable rural development is falling short for most farming families in Morocco, all while there is great natural and human potential. It is the multiple Moroccan frameworks—including cultural frameworks—that point the participatory way forward for local communities to plan projects. Will there be widespread training and funding to help communities identify and manage their projects, especially distant areas that are experiencing real difficulty? Morocco's success in this way is of vital and even urgent importance for itself and for the regional dispersion of these principles of community organization.

13. See John Campbell, "Participatory Rural Appraisal as Qualitative Research: Distinguishing Methodological Issues from Participatory Claims," *Human Organization* 60, no. 4 (2001): 382.