



Home > Africa > North Africa > A Paradigm Project for the Future – Location: Morocco



North Africa

A PARADIGM PROJECT FOR THE FUTURE – LOCATION: MOROCCO

NOVEMBER 1, 2016 DR. YOSSEF BEN-MEIR HIS MAJESTY KING MOHAMMED VI OF MOROCCO., OLD TOMB OF RABBI DAVID, PARADIGM PROJECT, PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER IN MOROCCO, RABBI'S HILOULA, TIFNOUTE VALLEY



An interfaith gathering in 2016 at Akrich (Marrakech) of Moroccan Muslim and Jewish people at the site of the tree nursery for farming families.

What makes for a great development project? Which qualities imbue an initiative with longevity and sustainability, enabling it to meet a whole range of interconnected material and emotional needs? Is there a single concept applicable to a specific geographical location that – exceptionally – embodies those qualities?

Yes! Allow me to introduce what I term a Paradigm Project – shovel-ready, with the potential to be inaugurated in the Kingdom of Morocco. In this context, a particular dimension of sustainability is germane.

The fact is that the more partners there are to a well-managed community project, the longer the project life. A greater number of partners means a higher number of interests and goals likely to be met, with more interested parties and contributors, lower risk, greater adaptability and efficiency and a higher level of beneficiary knowledge and ability to reinvest.

The Paradigm Project in question is indeed a unique case, involving the Moroccan Jewish community playing an indispensable role in meeting Morocco's need for one billion trees and plants and thus aiding in the dissolution of the harsh burdens of rural poverty. The initiative could inspire

the world since it combines Muslim-Jewish collaboration with local-to-international and private-public partnerships.

The Paradigm Project's multi-faceted nature and unique features have enabled it to meet the criteria for becoming a Clinton Global Initiative **commitment to action**.

Is it agricultural? Environmental? Multicultural? Does it empower women, youth and marginalized families? Does it advance democratic procedures, civil society and businesses? Does it increase domestic and foreign trade and jobs? Does the project invest in human development and address causes of rural poverty? Does it develop highly employable and nationally imperative skills? Does it further food security, carbon balance and Morocco's goals?

Yes, to all of the above!

Origins

A full 23 years have passed from the project's conception to the consensus for expansion of the resoundingly successful pilot.

In my mid-twenties, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco, living in the Tifnoute Valley on the south side of the High Atlas Mountains. Passing through the Ouarzazate region, I noticed a barren, eroding mountainside with majestic, ancient white structures nestled at its base.

I was both curious about the buildings and cognizant that the mountainside could be terraced, providing arable land for much-needed nurseries. Later I learned that this site houses the thousand-year-old tomb of Rabbi David ou Moché, one of hundreds of Moroccan *tsaddikim* – Jewish saints. Other structures have been provided to accommodate the hundreds of visitors arriving every year, particularly during the fall, for the Rabbi's *hiloula* (commemoration of the passing of his soul) that occurs straight after the Jewish festival of *Sukkot*.

I saw an opportunity. While farming families need desperately to grow fruit trees, as one of a series of measures necessary to end systemic rural poverty, they find it impossible to give up their existing land for two years in order to establish nurseries. The input of new land in the interim, before transplanting, is therefore vital in order to break the deadlock. The Jewish community of Morocco, with over six hundred rural sites, could be a potential partner in this enterprise.

At the time of writing I am president of the **High Atlas Foundation (HAF)**, a U.S.-Moroccan nonprofit organization which I cofounded in 2000 with other former Peace Corps Volunteers. We work with farming communities 'from farm to fork' – from the setting up of nurseries to the sale of certified organic product and carbon offsets.

Our model is to engage in partnerships with communities and utilize participatory methodology to determine and implement an initial project before utilizing revenue thus obtained to invest in students and schools, women's cooperatives, drinking water, irrigation, and training – the priorities expressed by those communities.

My father, **Dr. Alon Ben-Meir**, is a writer and activist for peace in the Middle East. Looking back, it seems natural that I sought to establish community nurseries for a predominantly Muslim society on land lent by the Moroccan Jewish people, adding an element of unity in a region burdened by catastrophic divisiveness.

I express sincere appreciation to His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco. The king has made the preservation of cemeteries of all faiths a matter of national importance and has established the connection between Moroccan multiculturalism and human development.

Pilot project at Akrich

In 2014, the HAF pilot nursery on Jewish communal land was established at Akrich, located on the northern side of the High Atlas in Al Haouz province, around 25 kilometers south of Marrakech, at the site of the 700-year-old tomb of the healer Rabbi Raphael Hacoheh,

Since that time we have planted 120,000 almond, fig, pomegranate, and lemon seeds which have reached maturity and now are maintained by about 1,000 farmers and 130 schools.

The project's cost of \$60,000 was graciously given by Wahiba Estergard and Mike Gilliland, owner of **Lucky's Market**, and Jerry Hirsch and the **Lodestar Foundation**. The then-Governor of Al Haouz province, Younes Al Bathaoui, showed fantastic leadership and coined the initiative's name, **House of Life**. Jacky Kadoch, president of the Jewish Community of Marrakech-Essaouira, together with his wife, Freddy, provide essential support, as do community members Isaac and Bloria Ohayon.

In 2016, the first trees from the pilot were **handed to local children and farmers** by the Governor joined by the United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco, Dwight Bush, Sr. Earlier, Ambassador Bush **hosted a reception** for House of Life at his residence in Rabat, at which advisor to the King, André Azoulay, and former Peace Corps Director in Morocco, Ellen Paquette, spoke about the years of dedication and benefits for Morocco embodied in our work.

Making the Paradigm Project a reality

Were the Paradigm Project to be implemented, the first year would see the construction of 26 nursery terraces supported by stone taken from the surrounding, crumbling mountains. The new arable space created would encompass half a hectare (5,000 square meters), upon which would grow 300,000 one-meter tall organic trees of walnut, carob, fig, pomegranate, cherry and almond, as well as dozens of varieties of medicinal herbs. On maturity they would be given without charge to

local associations, 5,000 farming families and 2,000 schools in provinces across Morocco. Together with our partners, HAF would monitor growth as part of carbon offsets sales, the revenue from which would be invested in further planting.

After one year, a sign made out of fallen organic walnut wood would be installed in loving memory of Julien Raphael Berdugo, a young, sadly deceased son of Arlette and Serge Berdugo, the Secretary General of the Jewish Community of Morocco.

After four years, there would be more than one million trees and herbs grown from seeds near the site of Rabbi David ou Moché burial and then transplanted to communal orchards and plots. As the plants mature, they would have an increasingly powerful social and environmental impact. Almost undoubtedly the project as a whole would initiate replication across the Moroccan Jewish community, providing hundreds of parcels of land adjacent to sacred sites throughout the kingdom. At scale, tens of millions of seeds would be planted every year and a better life afforded to all.

Achieving the vision

To bring the Paradigm Project to fruition, we need \$300,000, which would cover the entire cost, including training communities in organic practices. On November 17th HAF is hosting a **Carbon Offset Auction** at COP 22 in Marrakech, sequestered by the local community orchards we plant. With our community partners, we currently have more than 500,000 saplings in twelve nurseries around Morocco.

Every day I feel grateful to work for sustainable development in Morocco, where national frameworks enable the implementation of projects to national scale. Here is where the House of Life project, sits so naturally. Implementing the Paradigm Project as part of this initiative would make manifest those partnerships that seek the people's prosperity, opinion and participation and, ultimately, the greatness of Morocco.

*Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is a sociologist and president of the **High Atlas Foundation**.*