

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [International](#)

# A Legacy of Peace Corps Service in Morocco

null | 19 Feb 2016 12:18 PM



## HIGHLIGHTS

Since the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) arrived in Morocco in 1963, over 5,000 Americans have served as part of the organization's partnership with the country to develop resilient communities through education and similar voluntary initiatives.

Since the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) arrived in Morocco in 1963, over 5,000 Americans have served as part of the organization's partnership with the country to develop resilient communities through education and similar voluntary initiatives.

For so many PCVs, this represents a physical, intellectual and emotional journey into the unknown that can be compounded by a sense of a lack of accomplishment, owing to an inability to perceive their contribution to the continuing process of emerging country development and the Peace Corps' long-term commitment to that mission. 'Why am I here?' and 'why was I there?' could be said to be something of a PCV refrain.

In 2010, having previously served in Eastern Europe, I was posted to the Kingdom as a Peace Corps Response Volunteer to work with Yossef Ben-Meir, an environmental PCV from 1993-95 and president of the High Atlas Foundation (HAF), which turned fifteen years old last year.

RCPV service differs from that of PCVs in that it is project-focused and there is a more intensive, exact matching of volunteers to assignments. Mine focused on NGO development and I worked alongside HAF staff, in particular, Nabila Jaber (included here in a photograph conducting a participatory meeting in a High Atlas mountain village), coordinator of the Center for Community Consensus and Sustainable Development at the Faculty of Law, Economics, and Social Sciences of Hassan II University in Mohammedia.

Yossef was teaching at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane when I arrived in the country and it was there, in his kitchen (a Moroccan version of Whole Foods!) that I had the privilege of talking with him about participatory development. Over many a chicken tagine dinner, I came to learn his story and that of the HAF, founded by Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), including himself, who served in Morocco. It's a tale of love and commitment on the part of PCVs – towards each other, towards Morocco and with respect to the Peace Corps' 'three goals' – and a testimonial to the lasting impact Peace Corps service has the capacity to impart.

## The Peace Corps' Mission

[Advertise With Us](#)

To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women  
To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served  
To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans

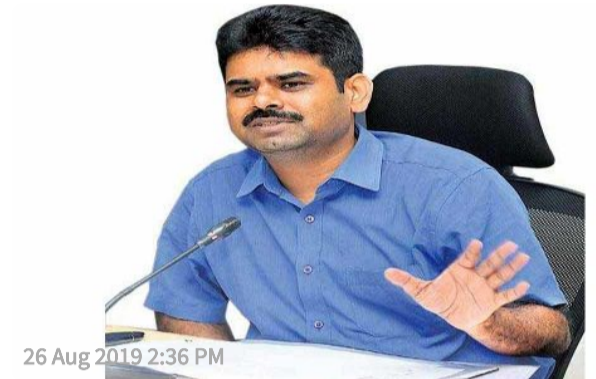
[www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)

In 1993, Yossef was assigned to as different a spot possible from New York City, from where he had just arrived – a remote mountain village in Morocco's High Atlas region. There he worked for the national park system and learned how to succeed in agriculture in an environment where water contributes more to soil erosion than to the well-being of the crops.

Having ended his service and now a highly motivated social entrepreneur, Yossef realized his vocation  
<https://www.thehansindia.com/posts/index/International/2016-02-19/A-Legacy-of-Peace-Corps-Service-in-Morocco/208362>

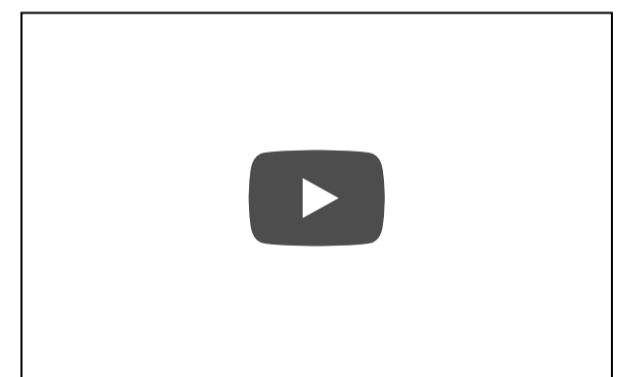


## TODAY'S TOP PICKS

[MORE >>](#)

26 Aug 2019 2:36 PM

### Lokesh Kumar is new GHMC commissioner

[G7 Summit: PM Modi highlights India's large scale efforts...](#)[Chidambaram's CBI remand extended till Aug 30](#)[Discussed Kashmir with Modi, told its under control: Donald](#)[Sensex climbs over 700 points after govt takes steps to boost...](#)

Having enjoyed his service and now a highly motivated social entrepreneur, Yossef realized his vocation lay in Morocco, to where he knew he had to return in order to continue focusing on arid mountain agriculture. Arriving in 1998, he was met at Casablanca's Mohammed V airport by RPCV Thom Anderson who, on finishing grad school, had returned to run the Seamens' Club in Casablanca. At Thom's suggestion, Yossef applied for and gained the post of Environmental Program Manager with Peace Corps Morocco, serving in that capacity for eighteen months.

[Advertise With Us](#)

The friends' subsequent decision, in 2000, to form a nonprofit, instead of a business, set the course for HAF, which has gone on to become an organization that succeeds in bringing together Moroccans, PCVs, and RPCVs.

A strong American-Moroccan board was created, no doubt attracted in part by fundraising events in New York that brought Moroccan culture to the States; heflas (parties) providing the opportunity to enjoy the cuisine (including generous helpings of mint tea!), music and art of the Kingdom and film festivals organized by HAF in 2010 and 2011.

In 2003, Yossef and Mouhssine Tadlaoui-Cherki, a Moroccan who had later taken over as Environmental Program Manager at the Peace Corps, requested a meeting with Margaret Tutwiler, then U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, to ask for project funds. HAF was at the beginning of its mission to plant organic fruit trees in order to produce cash crops, thus aiding disadvantaged local communities and helping combat soil erosion in the High Atlas mountain region.

Ambassador Tutwiler, who possessed a reputation for toughness, agreed to the meeting, arranging for the participation of several agriculture experts, including the head of USAID. While Yossef knew that planting trees are a grassroots business in every sense of the term – and not in the same league as the large-scale projects in which USAID typically engages – he had a refined, viable technical and business model and was prepared to give it his best shot.

In closing, he described the reaction of one particular mountain community when the first truck of saplings arrived in their village—“they cried,” said Yossef “because they saw planting a tree as an act of faith.” “Well then,” replied the ambassador, “let's spread some faith around.” The project was funded within a week! In the long term, this episode set a new precedent as the Ambassador was granted a discretionary fund from which HAF was to benefit further (alongside other organizations) in later years.

These days, rather than merely purchasing saplings, HAF concentrates on establishing organic nurseries. By 2014 the organization had achieved its goal of establishing a million organic trees and medicinal plants in Morocco and is now engaged in its One Billion Tree Campaign, which includes its junior educational initiative, Sami's Project, and House of Life, an intercultural organic agriculture scheme utilizing land adjoining Jewish sacred sites for the benefit of local Muslim farming families.

Alongside planting trees, HAF's focus areas now include water – in terms of efficient irrigation and potable supplies – clean energy, women and youth empowerment, business cooperative formation, intercultural initiatives, and education. All projects are identified by beneficiary communities at meetings facilitated by HAF-trained staff utilizing participatory development methodology.

Moreover, while HAF raises half of its funds in the U.S. and a half in Morocco, with the assistance of successive Moroccan and American ambassadors and countless others who believe in the cross-cultural partnership, it has shifted its focus towards events designed to attract and reinforce partnerships. These have included receptions held at the U.S. Ambassador's residence in Rabat and at Akrich, south of Marrakesh, the House of Life pilot site.

Since 2009 (the year before I arrived in Morocco) when HAF created the Mohammedia.Center for Community Consensus-Building and Sustainable Development, the foundation has gone on to engage in four further university partnerships.

[Advertise With Us](#)

During my service, I helped design a program at the Center to educate and promote participatory development and also prepared the first draft of a participatory development guide for Moroccan village leaders and university students.

In retrospect, I believe that – apart from these worthwhile outcomes, for which I am very grateful – the 'real' purpose of my time in Morocco, in another, perhaps even higher sense, was to meet Yossef and others, Moroccans and Americans, who continue the legacy of Peace Corps service and translate it into something tangible and understandable. In this way, they build models of hope and inspiration, for PCVs and all those involved in the often uncertain vocation of human development, that is applicable on an infinitely wider scale.

By so doing, those nagging existential questions – ‘why am I here?’ and ‘why was I there?’ - receive a definitive response, namely that as volunteers each of us makes a contribution which we may not even recognize at the time, including the forging of individual and collective relationships, of goodwill between our countries and – with reference to the Peace Corps’ Third Goal - the creation of change within ourselves, as Americans who come to understand and appreciate diverse cultures.

By Lillian Thompson

### More On

◀ [Peace Corps](#)

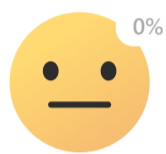
Download The Hans India [Android App](#) or [iOS App](#) for the Latest update on your phone.

### MORE STORIES

What is your reaction?



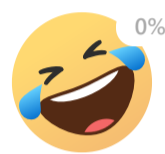
Happy



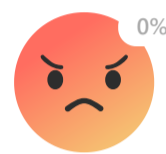
Unmoved



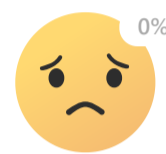
Amused



Excited



Angry



Sad

[Advertise With Us](#)