

World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought – June 17

By Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir
President, High Atlas Foundation

On this world date to combat desertification - and when considering the great mountain ranges in Morocco as well as desert - we point to conditions replete with prosperity-potential, as well as systemic poverty and serious risk to the region and nation that will come with delayed action.

My twenty years of not being able to walk away from transformative project possibilities in rural Morocco arises from precisely this dichotomy - between real development opportunities that would sustainably multiply the economy and engine social change, and the current subsistence conditions that see schools without a running water, education cut short for most and the multitude of dreams left hardly spoken.

But the great and most dependable hope, for Morocco and all nations, for a vast sustainable development breakthrough relies on this – communities given the opportunity to plan and implement priority local projects, as determined by them. Dozens of High Atlas Foundation projects – in agriculture, education, health and training – in the mountainous and dry regions of Morocco attest to community participation fully enabling project sustainability. Globally, the development field indelibly links community-driven projects with achieving social goals.

However, in addition to the people ready and running with participatory development when given the chance, another just as vital great hope needs to and does coexist (thanks to Morocco). The Kingdom wants the participation of the people in development to meet their human needs, to actualize participatory democracy and have a people's representatives completely dedicated to this goal. This goes to the heart of why Morocco is so important to the region, and world – and explains its hopeful and still uncertain experience in the Arab Spring. National parameters have been created – through the example of the National Initiative for Human Development, the Communal Charter, Decentralization, and others – for a bottom up burst in local sustainable growth.

Thus, just in terms of national potential that now exists, popular development within a highly supportive Moroccan context can achieve scale within the entire nation, across the 11,000 villages and countless urban neighborhoods. The direct engagement of the people in their own sustainable human development can occur across Morocco without not just legal barriers, but on the contrary, with the legal requirement of municipalities and national programs to do so.

The dire problem for Morocco is implementation, and the fall-out level of lack of engagement by the people in local development, and the sustainable application which occurs in far too few places.

In the mountains, people's key ideas to combat the alarming erosion include water-efficient irrigation systems laid across terraces built to mountain summits, that have growing upon them organic trees and plants that feed the nation and world. This would engine investment

in safe drinking water, schools, women's empowerment and the realization of the priorities of the people.

The urgency to address desertification and dry eroding lands exacerbated by climate change is because its effects touches upon all aspects of life; it is integrated with matters of peace and stability, and our common future. Morocco's has a multi-cultural national identity that is preserved, celebrated, and codified. National unity and diversity opens needed pathways to human development, and is a source of great benefit and possibility in Morocco, and carries global meaning. This raises the stakes for the world for the success of Morocco's people-propelled development model. Its success would be by way of embracing difference, and for the marginalized.

The major question for Morocco, and that will profoundly impact its place among nations in the region, is: how soon and how well can the critical training (with local civil, public, and citizen members) that will catalyze participatory planning by local communities be delivered, and those projects they identify be implemented? Strategic programs and successful cases certainly exist (including to build the capacities for civil management with accountable systems). However, the level needed by the people of widely applied efficacy does not exist enough and appears very sluggish across years, but could rise in all places any time if sparked with community meetings.

The High Atlas Foundation started its participatory development mission in Morocco - and started with mountain communities, that are becoming markedly dryer every year. The impact of our and Morocco's work is with all those involved in implementing community determination in the Arab Spring and the world.

Morocco's success, built around the participatory approach to development and addressing environmental threats, could be the boon forward in the tumultuous region. The model Morocco seeks is a national imperative and global guide: of local control of shared new growth and resource management –and with multi-sectoral and national level partnership, and full recognition and inclusion of all people.

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