
OPINION

Beyond Carbon: How Holistic Tree Planting Fuels Sustainable Development and Community Empowerment

YOSSEF BEN-MEIR/KAITLYN WARING



Community-led tree planting at a local Moroccan tree nursery in Meknes, September 2024 - PHOTO/ HAF/ELIA NEUSCHELLER FOUNDATION

Recent assertions have suggested that tree planting is not as effective a climate solution as once thought. Bill Gates argued in 2023 that the idea of planting enough trees to solve the climate crisis is “complete nonsense,” and the efficacy of tree planting has been a widely debated topic.



1. [Tree Planting Done Wrong](#)
2. [A Holistic View of Tree Planting](#)
3. [A Model of Planting Trees for Development](#)
4. [Trees in a Cycle of Sustainable Development](#)

While only planting trees cannot solve the world’s climate issues, nor will any single action, **arguments for moving away from it altogether are often dismissive of the true potential that culturally appropriate and holistic tree programs can have within larger development initiatives.**

The value of the number of trees planted toward mitigating climate impacts must be measured in consideration with **the**



the number of family incomes stabilized, and all other measures involved in community development.

+ INFO



A sign heralding the coming sustainable development

+ INFO

Tree Planting Done Wrong

Studies against tree planting as climate action often highlight the impact of underdeveloped tree planting programs, including poor growth rates, destruction of native ecosystems, and monoculture plantations that store minimal carbon.

Such negative effects do exist globally where improperly implemented projects overlook a region's environmental and social contexts. In fact, tree planting solely for economic gain (often the case with misdirected companies or individuals at the helm), is counterproductive to climate mitigation goals. The true value of tree planting can only be determined when examining them, from a project's conception to its wider development impacts.

+ INFO



Overcoming Severe Water Scarcity: A Moroccan Vision

+ INFO

A Holistic View of Tree Planting

Few people claim that tree planting is a cure-all solution to our environmental crisis, but opposition to tree planting as a major strategy ignores the carefully thought-out projects involving endemic species and local people that have significant, far-reaching impacts.

A truly sustainable initiative must begin with a community's own indication of their goals, leading to locally developed action plans to achieve those goals. A tree planted is not simply a tree but an embodiment of a community's discovery of these goals and determination to achieve them.

Studies have shown the important value that tree planting projects can have so long as they have clear, locally determined goals, coordinated efforts between all stakeholders, and a focus on entire ecosystems over single trees.

People plant trees for several varied reasons including environmental restoration, economic benefit, and cultural or spiritual values. Therefore, the number of trees planted cannot be seen as the end goal but rather a single step in a multi-faceted movement towards development.

It is critical that tree planting be appreciated not only for the trees themselves, but also for their role in the empowerment journeys of communities, the construction of vital agriculture and water infrastructure, the enhancement of food and water security, and the overall fostering of long-term community resilience.



The Akrich tree nursery in the Moroccan province of Al-Haouz, which benefits the region's farming communities, built on land lent free of charge by the Moroccan Jewish community -

A Model of Planting Trees for Development

When tree planting is launched as a component of larger development, it often results not only in agroforestry-related outcomes, but also other indicators like higher literacy rates, increases in girls' participation in education, water and school infrastructure, and other vital priorities that communities identify.

In Morocco, a community program has been implemented for agricultural advancement, food security, and women's empowerment that encompasses tree planting's transformative potential.

The program applies a new technique to tree planting that shifts from plastic to biodegradable sapling sacks produced by the local women's cooperative. This project was born from the community's women themselves who determined that developing their sewing skills would be a rewarding and profitable way to build their cooperative.

Through this initiative, the women benefit from the profits of selling their products and gain a sense of purpose and accomplishment from having built their cooperative. In return, their products offer a more sustainable alternative to typical tree planting methods. These benefits return to the community and cooperative in the form of income for farmers, food products to be consumed or sold, and employment for local people.

Trees in a Cycle of Sustainable Development

Well-designed tree planting programs spark cycles of environmental action and empowerment where each encourages progress in the other. For example, many tree planting techniques improve soil quality, and soils are another major carbon sink. When farmers are empowered to undertake agroforestry practices that improve soil, farm ecosystems as a whole benefit and increase in carbon storage capacity.

Tree planting also creates opportunities for renewable energy. Energy input is critical at all steps of agricultural production, with renewable energy offering the most sustainable approach. For example, integrating solar panels with tree planting to power irrigation means that carbon is sequestered through trees while energy-related carbon emissions are reduced.

This cycle expands beyond the environment through cooperative building, for example, where alternative livelihood sources are built. Sustainable tree planting also enhances food and water security, which has outsized impacts on the health and well-being of a community. When people feel healthier, they are more able to go to school and work and contribute to their communities.

We need this kind of cyclical rather than linear action to see long-term development and avert climate catastrophes. When systems are more resilient, local people become more resilient as well. And, when people begin to see the benefits of tree planting programs, it empowers them to take their efforts even further.

While the act of tree planting alone cannot solve all the world's climate problems, the rhetoric that tree planting is 'nonsense' discourages investment into reforestation and afforestation initiatives that are increasingly critical and have proven to be successful in sparking long-term development processes.

Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is President of the High Atlas Foundation in Morocco.

Kaitlyn Waring is a student at Northeastern University in Boston (USA) and is currently volunteering with the High Atlas Foundation.

SHARE ON:



TAGS:

Morocco Opinion Morocco climate change Agriculture

OPINION AUTHORS

-- Select author --

TODAY NEWS



Representatives of Morocco's regions discuss implementation of Mohammed VI's regionalisation plan



Russia offers guarantees to Algeria to renew its space fleet against Morocco



Egypt will import around 160 liquefied gas shipments by 2025



Indra stands out as a world leader in technological sustainability according to the Dow Jones Sustainability Index



Las flores como gesto diplomático: historia y simbolismo en las relaciones internacionales

MOST VIEWED