



Earthquake Recovery in Morocco: All "Phases" at Once

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Psychosocial empowerment session facilitated by the High Atlas Foundation in the Al Haouz province (Image by HAF, February 2024)



By Yossef Ben-Meir

Devastating earthquakes are nightmarish realities, and it is only by waking and doing day after day that we slowly, but surely, hopefully recover. The gradual process of healing is with so many steps forward and in different directions, but ultimately to increasingly better places.

Here, I will share with you some observations about the High Atlas Foundation's experiences in the relief and rebuilding effort in Morocco, and also express what impacted families and communities see as essential points of support that can help them achieve emotional recovery and build the best future that they seek.

First, we commonly think there are clear phases that mark the time forward from catastrophic events, certainly beginning with all-out emergency assistance, followed by actions for relief, and ultimately rebuilding livelihoods and new development and growth. Thankfully, the all-out emergency assistance to save lives immediately from mountainsides collapsing onto homes is past us. However, the phases that follow are not phases at all, but are ongoing, simultaneous fronts that need to be advanced upon immediately, every day.

Relief and rebuilding remain necessary all at once. We still need to deliver food items, particularly milk for infants and children; hygiene, cooking, and other supplies; stoves and other sources of warmth. The severity of the awful drought where we also find ourselves has intensified. Essential food and other materials prices have increased, deepening already difficult familial struggles. The price of olive oil, for example, one of the most vital food items in Morocco, has almost doubled since last year.

The trauma remains wrenching and it is only through the courage of surviving family members that they seek opportunities to somehow face the pain and move forward. Rebuilding—particularly water infrastructure for irrigation and drinking—is still a matter of urgency and pervasive necessity, especially since the earthquake hit as this new planting season was approaching. Water infrastructure is integral to restoring and rebuilding; terraces are necessary for agricultural cultivation and for stemming major levels of erosion and rockslides. Emotional healing sets the terms and priorities of rebuilding, and relief through the provision of food and other materials creates the necessary comfort and calm for psychosocial sessions to be as inclusive and helpful as possible.



A second lesson, one that did not surprise us but gave us a deep level of reassurance in the High Atlas Foundation's participatory empowerment methodology applied over years, is that a genuine approach to community-driven sustainability has strong synergies with psychosocial healing that results in empowerment. We always knew at HAF that the IMAGINE methodology for personal discovery leading to collective planning and action had emotional healing benefits. Inevitably, as we work in different parts of the country, trauma experienced in people's lives and homes comes to the forefront as they necessarily analyze their life conditions in planning the future they most want. It stands to reason that, for example, we need to analyze our social relationships that uplift us or may hinder us as an important step toward ultimately identifying actions and projects leading to sustainable personal and community growth.

Specifically, we learned with humanitarian relief partners after the earthquake that the IMAGINE empowerment methodology HAF has facilitated with women's groups in more than 20 Moroccan provinces since 2015 is actually also an effective applied approach to assisting psychosocial healing and equipping members of traumatized communities with the needed tools to become functional and whole again. To capture the point, the planning of community-based sustainable development must resemble, to some degree, strategies for individuals in group settings to advance emotional recovery.

A final lesson is perhaps a sad irony of our world: this terrible crisis and overwhelming loss has brought to life development opportunities needed by these very communities that were struck on September 8th, building these very canals and waterways, constructing these new terraces, installing these drinking water systems, coming together and reconciling any past divisions to secure solidarity and joint action.

The idea is old and somehow remains unsettling that, for some reason, we must lose to gain, that, as another example, the High Atlas Foundation, which has been planting trees with communities in Morocco for over 20 years, is now receiving new and larger investments in trees as the immediacy of the climate crisis is increasingly understood. The rebuilding projects that we are now assisting are projects that for years if not decades have been the priorities of the people, only now being realized following a tragedy. And how many more lives might have been saved if those long-held development dreams of the people were realized before September 8th? How many people would have been saved if we built the terraces a year ago that we are building now? How much more investment would we have had if the revenue



damage?

Perhaps the lesson is that we as a human collective must spend our fullest energy each day to help realize the people's will, which may result in sparing lives tomorrow.

Looking forward, whether as a caring and generous individual or a representative of an institution, whether Moroccan or wherever we may be from, there is a place for each of us in this relief, rebuilding, and psychosocial empowerment campaign with communities of the Atlas. It's about children, women, and men, youth and the elderly, the one and the many. It's about meeting needs today, tomorrow, and the next century. It's participatory, personal, and public. It's water, renewable energy, food, education, health, culture, production, artisanry, and agriculture. It's skills and infrastructure. It's all sectors, everyone in the struck areas. It's an initiative across the seasons. We can be part of healing to create a wonderful Moroccan reality driven in all respects by the communities themselves, partnering with all Moroccan sectors, finally achieving what they have long set out to do.

The High Atlas Foundation is committed to Moroccan society in every aspect of its diversity, to its national intent for communities to explore and realize their most sincere goals, and to the sustainable development of communities. We are grateful for our call to service, for the participatory, empowerment, psychosocial methodology that we've developed over years with terrific partners, and for the resources garnered by so many thousands of people and so many hundreds of institutions to bring to bear for community development.

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