

Jason Yossef Ben-Meir - Morocco

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Jason Yossef Ben-Meir, Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco (1993-1995), returned to the Corps in 1998 as an Associate Peace Corps Director. He is now the president of the High Atlas Foundation, which he founded to work with rural communities throughout Morocco.



Interview with Jason Yossef Ben-Meir, President of the High Atlas Foundation

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Jason Yossef Ben-Meir first went to Morocco to work in villages that bordered Morocco's largest national park, the Toubkal National Park outside of Marrakech. His job was to find out what projects would generate substantial economic growth. He originally joined the Peace Corps instead of going to graduate school because he wanted to directly address the myriad issues of poverty and make a difference. He is so glad he did.

His parents are originally from Iraq, and working in Morocco opened up a cultural connection for him that had been buried for years. It was not just hearing Arabic again like he did in his childhood, but also being immersed in an Arab culture, hearing the music, eating the food – it all flooded back to him. Jason said he got to know his grandfather better because he saw him in so many of the people he met in Morocco.

Jason founded the High Atlas Foundation to work with rural communities throughout the country. In this role, he works with Moroccan counterparts and visits remote villages where they facilitate meetings including men and women to learn what changes they would like to see, what resources they need, and to assemble action plans to move forward on projects that meet their needs. The villagers prioritize what they want, and the foundation raises the money to move ahead with the desired project, which then is implemented and managed by the community themselves.

One project the foundation has launched is tree planning. It has set a goal of planting a million fruit trees over several years within communities that border Morocco's national parks. To date the project has planted 110,000 trees.

The Foundation supports women's projects because it has found that programs supporting women help entire families and have a high rate of success.

Jason has met many people in Morocco that embody the spirit of social entrepreneurship. One in particular, Larbi Didougen, his former counterpart at the Ministry of Agriculture, helped start projects in tourism and agriculture that generated income for a community that bordered the national park so the villagers would stop grazing their animals – the first such success. Later, Larbi quit his well-paying job to work exclusively with villages to promote economic development.

Jason defines a social entrepreneur as someone who can draw out what other people want, build the needed partnerships, and raise the money to realize their goals. He sees social entrepreneurship as about seeing all sides, negotiating, and making things happen. He feels he is a social entrepreneur, not because he has the right answers, but because he can ask the right questions, get the answers and then work in partnership to move them forward. Communication is the most important ingredient – the community has to be in control of the process

His advice to social entrepreneurs and upcoming social entrepreneurs is that playing the third party role is the key ingredient – he feels that social entrepreneurs can be a third party between nations in conflict, between communities in competition, and between individuals in misunderstandings. He advises not to try to decide the solution, but to bring people together and help them understand each other's goals.

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