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## Millennium Challenge And Morocco

**By: Jason Ben-Meir**

With hundreds of millions of dollars becoming available for Morocco through the new U.S. foreign aid initiative, Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), millions of Moroccans can potentially be engaged in a development process that generates significant socio-economic benefits for them and their communities.

To achieve this vital goal, however, a flexible implementation strategy needs to be put into practice - one that responds to the range of priority needs that are commonly expressed by local communities across the nation.

A "flexible" development strategy pursues development projects that local men and women determine during community-wide meetings. When community members come together in meetings that are facilitated in a participatory way and together decide their development goals, they sustain the projects that result because they directly address their self-defined

needs and interests.

Rather than defining the specific forms of projects that MCA will support, a process Moroccan and American officials are currently engaged in, a better strategy is to fund locally designed projects that are in partnership with government and non-government agencies - whether in agriculture, health, education, gender empowerment, etc. If, however, a flexible strategy is not adopted, then there will likely be a disconnect between MCA projects and the needs prioritized by Moroccan communities.

Indeed, there already appears to be some disconnect. For example, rural tourism is among the projects that MCA is intending to support. Even in areas that see thousands of rural tourists every year, such as the High Atlas valley that leads to Mount Toubkal, the tallest peak in North Africa, according to the local commune only ten percent of the villages in the area actually benefit from the passage of tourists.

Even if this were increased to 20 percent, it would not nearly benefit rural families as much as modern irrigation and potable water projects, which impact every household and which local people rank among their top priorities. Projects that promote rural tourism are rarely, if ever mentioned by the local people as a priority need because they have less tangible outcomes than other more critical opportunities for self-reliant development.

In May 2005, Morocco's King Mohammed VI launched the "National Initiative for Human Development" to promote decentralized development projects. Fortunately, MCA's

commitment to the National Initiative provides a framework to advance the kind of flexible strategy that is needed.

The National Initiative and MCA should together pursue a two-pronged strategy that will advance their shared goals and the goals of Morocco's communities: first, train rural teachers, government extensionists, NGO personnel and citizens in facilitating group activities that help community members determine priority projects and develop plans of action to achieve them; and second, fund the projects catalyzed by the newly trained facilitators in the field. The National Initiative already recognizes the importance of such training; it now needs to be broadly implemented.

Since communities across Morocco face different sets of challenges and opportunities, the projects the regionally diverse communities come to express as their priorities will span a broad range of areas. There is, however, consistency among the projects Morocco's rural communities determine for themselves; these include irrigation, potable water, education, women's cooperatives, tree planting and fisheries. MCA is already intending to support some of these areas.

Implementing a flexible development strategy will generate far reaching socio-economic benefits beginning in a matter of months. A community planning their own development is a local democratic process that leads to the creation of civil associations and inter-community collaboration.

The National Initiative and MCA should seriously consider implementing a pilot of this strategy. The Province of El Haouz is a particularly viable target area, since it is the first province in Morocco to have created a federation of its more than 1,300 indigenous NGOs, thus creating a foundation for broad-based mobilization.

Ten million dollars will generate transformative benefits for 50,000 people, and create a national model for the National Initiative and a powerful international example of the positive effects of MCA.

*(Jason Ben-Meir is president of the High Atlas Foundation ([www.hihatlasfoundation.org](http://www.hihatlasfoundation.org)), an American non-profit organization founded by former Peace Corps Volunteers who served in Morocco and dedicated to rural community development.)*



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