

Morocco's Interfaith Collaboration Boosts Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development

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The Morocco government's policy for national multiculturalism and the diversity of its historic identity groups is leveraging its rich multicultural heritage to drive agricultural sustainability and rural economic growth.

A unique partnership between Muslim and Jewish communities, for example, has enabled the establishment of community-managed fruit tree nurseries, transforming rural livelihoods by providing clean drinking water, irrigation infrastructure, and financially independent women's cooperatives.

These nurseries built on land lent by the Moroccan Jewish community, provide farmers with alternative high-value crops like almonds, pomegranates, and olives, replacing traditional low-yield barley and corn.

This initiative aligns with Morocco's National Initiative for Human Development, supporting economic resilience and environmental sustainability.

The initiative provided a significant proportion of funding to construct four nurseries (two completed and two in the process) to provide trees to farming families who seek to transition from barley and corn to more income-generating organic fruit products. The integration of monitoring the trees planted by farming families for certified and commercialized carbon offset credits further enhances the community impact.

By integrating interfaith cooperation with agricultural innovation, Morocco is enhancing food security, empowering women farmers, and promoting climate-smart agriculture.

The pilot nursery, established in 2012 in the Tamsloht municipality, Al Haouz province, now produces 70,000 trees annually. This region was severely impacted by the September 2023 earthquake that occurred in the High Atlas Mountains, amplifying the significance of sustainable agriculture projects for post-disaster recovery.

The second nursery, built in 2020 in the Ouarzazate province, has produced approximately 40,000 trees, with two additional nurseries in the process of being constructed in the Marrakech and Ouarzazate areas.

All four nurseries are situated adjacent to Moroccan Jewish saints' sacred burial sites, some dating back 1,000 years. With over 600 locations of religious significance in the country, interfaith and intersectoral partnerships effectively play a significant national role in assisting farming communities transition to fruit tree agriculture.

They can together build a more resilient, economically enhancing, and healthier option than traditional reliance on growing barley and corn.

Origins and Development of a Moroccan Cultural-Agricultural Program

In 1993, the author of this article volunteered with the Peace Corps living in a village of the High Atlas Mountains called Amsouzerte, where the journey from the village to the nearest city centers took almost 20 hours along unpaved roads and mountain passes.

At the foot of a mountainside, fifty kilometers from Amsouzerte, there was an old, white mausoleum, uncharacteristic of the earth-brick homes typical of rural Moroccan landscapes.

Even at this time, it was immediately clear that eroding mountain areas offered large

potential for terrace construction surrounding the mausoleum for the Muslim community to build tree nurseries and derive generational benefits.

Tree nurseries are valuable for Moroccan farming communities because 70 percent of current agricultural land in the country generates just 10-15 percent of agricultural revenue. Fruit tree cultivation allows farming families to transition from less lucrative barley and corn crops to higher income-generating crops. M

orocco has both organic and endemic varieties of almond, Argan, carob, cherry, date, fig, lemon, pomegranate, olive, and walnut trees among others, as well as dozens of species of wild medicinal plants.

Based on dialogue with farming families and communities, this local project was derived directly from their own determination and development perspective. The High Atlas Foundation (HAF)—a Moroccan national civil association founded in 2000 by former Peace Corps Volunteers who initially served in this mountain region—facilitated empowerment and participatory methods that assisted people in identifying their doubts and fears, project priorities, and actions forward to achieve their discovered goals of tree infrastructure and related water infrastructure.

The mausoleum near Amsouzerte, the burial site of Hebrew saint David-Ou-Moshe, was identified as a potential location for tree nurseries to support local farming. The High Atlas Foundation (HAF) secured land leases from the Moroccan Jewish community but faced funding challenges.

A successful pilot nursery launched in 2012 at Akrich in Al Haouz province, benefiting 175 farming families. The project also spurred women's economic empowerment, road

construction, and clean water access, showcasing the broader impact of integrating agriculture with community development.

Scaling Cultural Initiatives and Sustainable Development

Morocco's diverse biozones provide rich opportunities for sustainable food production, while its multicultural identity fosters social solidarity. The country's policies emphasize interfaith harmony as a pathway to development and peace.

To be effective, interfaith initiatives must be community-driven, addressing local needs through participatory development. This inclusive approach builds trust and strengthens social unity. Morocco's commitment to community-led growth is embedded in its policies, ministry strategies, and constitution, ensuring long-term success and broader regional impact.

After coordination with the Ouarzazate governor and with the Regional Directors of relevant public agencies, construction of the new nursery began in 2019. In the past four planting seasons, over 46,000 fruit saplings were produced at this nursery that were then planted in the private agricultural lands of 195 small landholder families, marking significant progress for the development trajectories of these communities.

Lands for future nurseries are increasingly being set aside by the Moroccan Jewish community to contribute to this interfaith organic fruit tree initiative, titled House of Life by the governor of the Al Haouz Province Younès Al Bathaoui, denoting the traditional title for a Jewish cemetery.

Monitoring and Commercializing Carbon Offset Credits

Tracking tree nurseries for carbon offset credits is a crucial part of the broader tree-planting initiative. These programs integrate participatory development, using local seed varieties, solar-powered irrigation, and reinvested carbon credit revenues to support community projects and alleviate rural poverty.

Monitoring involves GPS tracking, GIS mapping, and registries to document tree growth, farmer details, species, and locations. Through PlanVivo, 80% of carbon credit revenue (valued at €40 per credit) returns to farmers, while 10% funds verification and another 10% supports High Atlas Foundation (HAF) operations, including compliance and project management.

Morocco's General Report on the New Development Model emphasizes greater investment in agriculture, human capital, and digitalization—elements central to the House of Life and carbon credit initiatives. Agriculture remains the country's most promising sector for economic growth and poverty alleviation, particularly when investments are directed at smallholder farmers.

Challenges in financing and program oversight persist, requiring better management systems and capacity-building for local organizations.

However, by leveraging carbon credit sales from tree planting, communities can generate income and reinvest in local development. Interfaith partnerships, such as the Moroccan Jewish community's provision of land for nurseries, play a vital role in expanding these initiatives, strengthening social cohesion, and enhancing economic resilience.