

Morocco's Higher Education Stimulus. The University of Participatory Learning and Action (UPLA)

By [Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir](#)

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*Most of our world is experiencing a time of public discontent that now necessitates accomplishing a better and different driver of renewal for our cities and rural places. Let us consider a new approach, rooted in a long-held understanding of the purpose of education, in which the experience develops the student's critical consciousness and capacity that is integral to the process of social change. To that end, a proposed new type of institution, **the University of Participatory Learning and Action (UPLA)**, would serve the need for community development and innovation.*

Few academicians in humanities today actively pursue social change as an inseparable part of their research and as a purposeful outcome of their work. Most social scientists stop once they are able to provide explanations for causes of social problems that they decide are most important to the

public. Some of them continue to detail inherently top-down solutions based on their analysis of (usually) limited quantitative data gathered from extractive questionnaires and interviews. Much of this research methodology creates the very attitudes they then measure.

Whether a crisis in public health, natural disaster response, or social and economic stability, our resilience depends upon exceptional support for local communities to advance smarter and equitable enterprises. UPLA will be a generator of local people's projects that they then manage so as to meet community-wide needs in food security, health, livelihoods, education, and other sectors of life. It will be a planning and implementing hub for students and educators from all backgrounds seeking sustainable, widespread prosperity by assisting community-driven research and action.

A hopeful pattern we are seeing in our world is that universities are requiring students to engage in volunteerism with human service organizations. Universities increasingly seek to impact in the best of ways their neighboring communities and beyond. Still, the social sciences, even if born from humanity's journey to improve the general welfare, see most of their practitioners not embracing their own disciplines' activist identities, lest their investigations be labeled as "biased" and they are no longer viewed as scientists.

The social science pendulum has been swinging in recent decades, alongside the global ascendancy of knowledge (from practice) that communities' self-described development priorities and solutions are most determinant factors for sustainability. Ethnographic data therefore really matter. UPLA's time has come. Our collective urgency for widespread growth, security, and a new environmental dawn, must now bring UPLA's arrival.

UPLA students and faculty will facilitate inclusive dialogue on local project design and implementation (participatory action research). Within two years, with a student body of 600 guided by 25 faculty, hundreds of projects in the civil, public, and private sectors will have been identified and be ready for implementation, initiatives that reinvest and build cohesion, transforming lives and counties. UPLA graduates will be empowered and will empower, forged from the transformative experience of remedying social disparity. Humanities in our time must engage people to discover *and* act.

UPLA will offer the following 13 social sciences that have strong foundations in service and collaborative learning and research, and advancing community participation: Adult Education, Anthropology, Applied Economics, Architectural Planning, Communications, Development Studies, Geography, Psychology, Public Affairs and Politics, Public Health, Social Work, Sociology, and Women's and Gender Studies.

UPLA will also be an international education center for students and professionals to receive coaching in applying field methods with people of towns, villages, neighborhoods and districts—women and men, young and older—to collectively analyze their situations and opportunities for enhancing their livelihoods. Then, based on their information and consulting with technical experts and partners, local communities will fulfill their self-determined action plans.

Methods come from hundreds of such activities that exist across the disciplines and sectors, that go by as many names, with "participatory" being in a number of them. Such methods are primarily qualitative and promote interaction and information-sharing. They assist communities in forging visions and goals, in defining timelines and detailing budgets. They use visual tools not requiring participants' literacy, and illuminate contextualized realities so beneficiaries can fashion strategies conducive for success.

UPLA will be a house of the people's knowledge that assists their decision-making about their futures. It could therefore not only appropriately inform the frameworks of global commitments, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, but also dramatically help accomplish them. UPLA will be at the forefront of pedagogical entrepreneurship that enables global communication pathways to gain broad grassroots perspectives across nations, a compelling new form of interaction to strengthen solidarity.

How do we establish UPLA? We begin with the relationships that we have, in the places where we live. There are many ideal locations for UPLA in the United States. Unrelenting poverty in upstate New York, for example, has left abandoned [educational centers](#), the renovation and use of which could provide economic stimulus for those communities.

Likewise, while the High Atlas Foundation has collaborated with Moroccan public and private universities to provide "learning-by-doing" development workshops, it would be more productive to catalyze all research of academic programs with local people. We could directly and measurably improve conditions with a UPLA center in the northeast of the country that is struggling for realized opportunity, toward the mountains south of Marrakech, or north of Errachidia where systemic poverty is concentrated.

Are there public officials and agencies, corporate leaders and businesses, and individuals, who are willing to partner, to dedicate a building, to fund a community's entrepreneurial idea, to embed or advocate embedding UPLA into national and global rebuilding plans? We must do this together in order for students, teachers, and communities to achieve sustainable societies with full action-research capabilities.

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Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is a sociologist and President of the High Atlas Foundation based in Marrakech, Morocco.

Featured image: Students of Ibn Zohr University in Agadir (Morocco) experientially learning the participatory planning method, Mapping Our Community (Photo by HAF; 10 December 2024).

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