



JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS & POLICY

TOPIC / GENDER, RACE AND IDENTITY

Participatory Interfaith Dialogue: The Keys to Addressing People's Needs in Morocco

by- **DR. YOSSEF BEN-MEIR** | MARCH 31, 2023

SHARE PAGE



Twenty-nine years ago, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer living in a mountainous High Atlas village called Amsouzerte, near the southern side of Morocco's Toubkal National Park. Back then, the journey from the village to the nearest city center took almost 20 hours along unpaved roads and mountain passes. At the foot of a mountainside, fifty kilometers from

seemed misplaced among the earth-brick homes characteristic of rural

HKS
Harvard Kennedy School

*Student Policy
Review*



...a, I could envision huge swaths of land being set aside as a burial ground for the local Muslim community to build tree nurseries and derive generational benefits. Tree nurseries are very valuable for Moroccan farming communities because 70 percent of agricultural land^[1] in the country generates only 10-15 percent of agricultural revenue. Fruit tree cultivation allows farming families to transition from less lucrative barley and corn crops and generate higher income.^[2]

Later, I learned that the mausoleum is a sacred tomb of a Hebrew saint (*tzaddik*, or 'righteous one')^[3] named David-Ou-Moshe, one of over 600 *tzaddikim* (Muslim, Jewish, and Christian) buried throughout Morocco. I realized the land around these burials could be leveraged for future tree nurseries, potentially generating tens of millions of saplings annually.



The burial place of the venerated Rabbi David-ou-Moshe as seen from the entryway to the adjacent hilltop fruit tree nursery. Imerdal, Morocco. July 2021. Photo: Katie Bercegeay/High Atlas

his project and the work of the
gh Atlas Foundation, are based on
nd development perspective.



Small-land holders often cannot designate the necessary nursery plot resources over the two years required for fruit tree seeds to mature; they must harvest every season from every available square meter to maintain their livelihoods. Thus, the question that arose then and remains prevalent for rural communities is *where do we acquire the land for nurseries to maximize our planting yields?*

On behalf of the farming families, I approached the Moroccan Jewish community to request land leases for building tree nurseries. They agreed, but the project still needed funding. However, many years passed, and the originally intended location remained undone, despite launching a successful pilot nursery at Akrich^[4] in the Al Haouz province near Marrakech at the burial site of the *tzaddik* Raphael Hacoen.

Community nurseries jumpstart a new development path toward economic and environmental sustainability. The Akrich tree nursery (financially assisted by Ecosia and FENELEC), for example, led to Imagine empowerment^[5] workshops and the nearby Achbarou Women's Carpet-Making Cooperative^[6]; a paved road now being built between the nursery/cemetery and the Cooperative, allowing visitors to easily to both sites; and a clean drinking water system in Achbarou village (funded by Yves Saint Laurent Fashion). It, therefore, is incumbent that agencies partner with these communities as land contributors to catalyze human development projects beyond the agricultural sector.

In recent years, the global community has been harshly reminded that much of the world does not reflect Morocco's inspiring faith and cultural solidarity model. The killers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, an AME church in South Carolina in 2015, and the Or L'Simcha Congregation (Tree of Life) synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 were each warmly greeted with "Salaam" and "Welcome" and "Shalom. The potential nursery near

devastating events, instead epitomizing the hopeful reality of interfaith

HKS
Harvard Kennedy School

*Student Policy
Review*

President of the High Atlas
to His Majesty King Mohammed



“We write, moved by a troubling time, and in complete belief that Morocco can redirect humanity’s course like no other nation by its ability to simultaneously affirm multicultural unity and alleviate people’s burden. This one project can catalyze to achieve all of this.”

I hand-delivered the letter to the Royal Palace in Rabat. Within the month, the Ouarzazate Governor called to meet and discuss the implementation of this tree nursery with the Regional Directors of all relevant public agencies and our organization. For twenty-five years, I had held fast to the dream of this nursery; its construction began two months following our appeal to the King, with two-thirds of the funding supplied by Morocco’s National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD), a donor strategy first broached in 2006.[\[7\]](#)

In addition to the Moroccan Jewish Community, the High Atlas Foundation also receives public land in-kind from Morocco’s National Agency for Water and Forests, enabling the planting of 4 million trees from 2003 until today. The first million trees took 14 years to plant. In 2023 alone, HAF is transplanting 1.7 million trees from 15 nurseries to benefit 10,000 farming families in 160 municipalities and building four new nurseries.[\[8\]](#)

Two of these new nurseries are on land from the Moroccan Jewish community (50 percent funded by NIHD), next to the burial sites of the *tzaddikim* Rabbi Moul Almay in Sidi Rahal outside of Casablanca and Rabbi Haroon Abou Hassira in Telouet of the Ouarzazate province. The name given to the interfaith organic fruit tree initiative by the Governor of the Al Haouz Province, Younès Al Bathaoui, is House of Life, denoting the traditional title for a Jewish cemetery.[\[9\]](#)



Carob saplings and medicinal herbs grow at the interfaith fruit tree nursery in Akrich, Morocco, which is built adjacent to a Jewish cemetery and the sacred 700-year-old burial site of Rabbi Raphael Hacohen, March 2023. Photo: Katie Bercegeay/High Atlas Foundation

We are also monitoring tree growth for carbon offsets with the University of Virginia (International Studies), Robert Bosch College (a United World College), Credit du Maroc, and Berge Bulk Blue Solutions, among the purchasers. This program charts a new carbon offset verification standard, integrating multiple existing methodologies to launch community initiatives through participatory development and empowerment workshops, particularly with women.^[10] Moreover, this strategy utilizes local, organic, and endemic seed varieties, incorporates renewable energy in the form of solar water pump systems at nurseries, reinvests offset revenue in new community projects within the regions that generated the credits, and concentrates tree planting with family farmers who are small landholders all while facilitating interfaith collaboration to alleviate rural poverty.

Morocco's policies encourage intercultural dialogue and communication for human development.^[11] Different faith communities in Morocco are brought together to share their historical narratives, which can lead to improved livelihoods and health through a participatory development approach by leveraging underutilized capacities. However, these necessary experiences



social transformation. House of Life cements the continuity of interfaith

scale and social change, by
new community projects.

memory and consciousness in the

country create opportunities, combining these factors has yet to reach the level of self-reliant development and a circular economy^[12] that the people urgently need. Through the [USAID Dakira^{\[13\]}](#) (or “Memory” in English) program, civil society organizations and public administrations seek to redress the lack of such participatory community dialogues in which people discuss the past and the future together and create a shared vision forward.

The most significant challenge for participatory planning is the need for more training on community dialogue facilitation to empower all voices and express all priorities. While manifold methods and activities can be used to explore personal and collective identity and create plans for the future, most people, including Moroccans, have never experienced these approaches and are, therefore, unable to initiate and steward the process.

Interfaith dialogue – the opportunity to voice our histories – can deepen understanding and provide reconciliation between historically antagonistic groups if sought. When this process is maintained and integrated with supporting projects, defined and managed by the people, it can become a basis for achieving sustainable and prosperous societies.

In Morocco, interfaith connections are convivial when they occur but demand total energy and commitment to organize. Taking this Moroccan approach to succeed across religious differences, we could inspire other nations of Africa, the Islamic World, and the Middle East.

^[1] Ben-Meir, Yossef. “Empowering Rural Participation and Partnerships in Morocco’s Sustainable Development.” *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*, 13, 14, no. 2 (November 15, 2019): 191–214.

^[2] Opfer, Kerstin. “Assessment Feedback Report September 2018 – Guidestar.org.” Guidestar.org, 2018.

<https://www.imagineprogram.net/do/aid/2367724/jewish/Tzaddik.htm>.

[4] Ben-Meir, Yossef. “Akrich Nursery Booklet.” highatlasfoundation.org, 2016. <https://highatlasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Akrich-Nursery-Booklet.pdf>.

[5] “Imagine Program.” IMAGINE Program. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://www.imagineprogram.net/>.

[6] “Participatory Approach with Women of Achbarou Cooperative.” High Atlas Foundation, March 9, 2022. <https://highatlasfoundation.org/participatory-approach-with-women-of-achbarou-cooperative/>.

[7] Ben-Meir, Jason Yossef. “CREATE AN HISTORIC MOROCCAN-AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP.” *International Journal on World Peace* 23, no. 2 (June 2006): 71–77.

[8] “High Atlas Foundation Plants Thousands of Trees with Moroccan Communities for Annual Tree Planting.” BusinessGhana. High Atlas Foundation, January 13, 2023. <https://www.businessghana.com/site/news/general/278143/High-Atlas-Foundation-Plants-Thousands-of-Trees-with-Moroccan-Communities-for-Annual-Tree-Planting>.

[9] Ben-Meir, Yossef. “House of Life – High Atlas Foundation.” highatlasfoundation.org, 2023. <https://highatlasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/EN-House-of-Life-Brochure-2023.pdf>.

[10] Ben-Meir, Yossef. “Balance Your Carbon Footprint.” highatlasfoundation.org, 2023. <https://highatlasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/HAF-Carbon-Offsets-Brochure-2023-1-1.pdf>.

www.diplomatie.ma, 2022.

HKS
Harvard Kennedy School

*Student Policy
Review*

/files/inline-
20%2822Nov-
ng%29.pdf.



[12] Jay, Vincent. "Means of Action." [economiecirculaire.org](https://www.economiecirculaire.org), November 4, 2015. <https://www.economiecirculaire.org/static/h/means-of-action.html#:~:text=The%207%20pillars%20of%20the,%2C%20education%2C%20energy%20and%20climate>.

[13] "Dakira: Morocco: Fact Sheet." U.S. Agency for International Development, February 3, 2023. <https://www.usaid.gov/morocco/fact-sheets/dakira>.

 **TOPICS** >

 **ABOUT THE AUTHOR** >

Related Articles

Gender, Race and Identity

Why Are We Not Talking About Climate Change's Role in Escalating Gender-Based Violence?

APRIL 22, 2025

by- **RIDHI AGGARWAL**

"The world today has no shortage of climate shocks, and its impacts continue to be dangerously and disproportionately felt by marginalized groups, perpetuating an