

Friday, December 20, 2024



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Photo Credit: High Atlas Foundation

Planting New Roots In A City Amidst The Clouds – OpEd

August 6, 2024 0 Comments

By Aidan Iacobucci

There is a point on National Route 7, abreast to Oued N’Fis and about halfway between Marrakech and Agadir, where the road seems to end. The black asphalt gradually fractures into dirt. A dual carriageway transitions into a single-lane serpentine

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thoroughfare that clings onto the mountainside. Road signs and directional markers become increasingly uncommon until travelers have nothing but their intuition (or perhaps Google Maps!) to guide them.

To exacerbate the effects of this lack of infrastructure, earthquake Al Haouz in September of 2023 caused incredible damage to the region. Structures and bridges collapsed. Land erosion destroyed terraced farms and village abodes. It has been almost a year, and many of these issues are still in dire need of mitigation. This municipality is one of many new communities to be assisted by HAF following the earthquake and it is called Aghbar.

A small municipality in the south of Marrakech-Safi region, Aghbar consists of 22 villages and a population of around 6500 people. It was founded in 1992, as part of a territorial division experienced by the Kingdom of Morocco. Connected by a web of winding mountain roads, Aghbar is defined by terraced clachans and warm hospitality all shaded by the striking presence of walnut trees old and new. The different villages are internally governed with Community Leader Larbi Adhar functioning as an overseer of all 22 villages, liaising between each village and provincial, regional, and national officials.

Over the last 9 months, HAF has worked primarily with three villages: Tanamerte, Lamabayt, and Widarane with a population of 1050 people (175 households), 450 people (75 households), and 480 people (80 households) respectively. Prior to the earthquake, HAF worked incrementally in Aghbar, “facilitating three small tree planting projects” according to Mohammed Ajrinija, Program Manager. However, following the earthquake, the municipality’s needs became more visible to the nonprofit sphere.

Ajrinija described the dissemination of assistance as existing in two parts: mitigating urgent risk to survival and developing sustainable projects that ensure that the region has a generative income for years to come. Immediately following the earthquake,

st Masood Azhar and his organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) are once again emerging



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HAF conducted needs assessments in different villages of Aghbar. Using a mobile application, communities were able to document their needs and request assistance.

This initial contact led to mass reparative efforts that included the rebuilding of water canals and pumps, irrigation systems, and houses. Using intermediate housing structures that cost about 35,000 dh, HAF was able to quickly alleviate the lack of secure housing in the region. The initial relief efforts also included food, clean water, and medication distribution.

Soon after the aftershock of Al Haouz, the Foundation moved from aiding in survival to aiding in durable, sustainable welfare. Their attention shifted from the wider region and municipality to the three aforementioned villages.

The unreliability of the needs assessment on the mobile application compelled HAF to foster a more holistic approach. HAF now works with the individual villages to conduct an appraisal of what they need, meeting individuals in the field. Ajrinija explained that this type of multifaceted development is the cornerstone of participatory democracy: "It is important that when we are doing needs assessment all stakeholders are represented, and with that, both genders." The heritage crops of the area are almonds, walnuts and cherries.

In accordance with HAF's mission for sustainable long-term, as well as cultural preservation, it is vital to preserve that tradition, while also introducing crops that are pertinent to the region and are able to weather the effects of climate change. This involves planting trees like carob, olives, and argan in addition to the almonds and walnuts. According to HAF's Agroforestry consultant Larbi Didougen, "Our activities, whether for the current project or others, encourage sustainable energy methods, using local species that coexist... species that have already been planted for centuries, some of which are endemic, others from the Mediterranean and Asia which are naturalized in North Africa. All these species are well adapted to the climates of Morocco and produce quality organic items under normal conditions."

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By abiding by these practices, the longevity of the work within Aghbar is all the more certain. As a Foundation, it is our goal to plant 1,000,000 trees in all 22 villages of the Aghbar municipality by the end of 2025. With this, problems of both food, revenue, and environmental erosion will hopefully be curbed.

To sunset the initial stages of HAF's work in Aghbar, the team arrived in Tanamerte, Lamabayt, and Widarane nine months following Al Haouz on June 26th and 27th, 2024. Beyond the cracked roads and white plastic intermediate shelters that juxtapose the sandstone masonry, the tone of the villages was not all negative. The team was met with fervent dancing, platters of couscous, legs of lamb, biscuits made from the almonds in the surrounding groves, and most importantly, faces brightened with hope. Beyond the physical reparative efforts that HAF began in Aghbar, there has been a reparation of spirit. "Before Covid-19" Ajrinija said "there would be communal eating, dancing, and celebration every two weeks. Now, since the earthquake, it has occurred less frequently due to the continued mourning of lives and resources lost. However, it is beginning to rapidly return." It is our hope that the culture of Bhahwach dancing, vigorous drumming, and singing (that entreats even the shiest of onlookers to join in the jubilation) is preserved and restored in the region along with economic stability.

In an interview with Ladhar, he says that "HAF changed our lives; allowed us to move on from survival to welfare. We are excited to see what will come." On the final day of HAF's stay, the entire village was encased in a cloud layer that soon dispersed to reveal midmorning sunshine. As an organization, it is our hope that the trees we plant and the assistance we provide will take root and see Aghbar withstand clouds of tragedy and embrace the radiant rays of sun to come.

December 17, 2024

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Aidan Iacobucci

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