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During the second session at Tizagharine village, Ijoukak Commune. Photo Credit: Human Aid Initiative

Rebuilding Lives: Empowering Communities After Al Haouz Earthquake – OpEd

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By **Houria Chouhab**

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By Sushant Sareen The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) designated terrori

Since September 8th, 2023, the lives of Moroccans affected by the Al Haouz Earthquake have been radically altered. While people might have been more accustomed to earthquakes in the northern provinces of the kingdom, no one could have predicted that this natural disaster would strike the High Atlas Mountains and the surrounding areas, resulting in the tragic loss of over 3,000 lives and thousands of injuries.

In the wake of this devastating event, the High Atlas Foundation (HAF) sprang into action. HAF initiated a multi-faceted approach by providing both material and psychosocial support with the residents of Al Haouz, Chichaoua, Taroudant, Ouarzazate, and Marrakech provinces. The support included the distribution of essential supplies such as food, clothing, floor mats, tents, solar and water kits, sheets, mattresses, school supplies, and hygiene products. HAF's commitment to these affected communities didn't stop there; they continued to explore ways to assist these communities in both the short and long term.

In collaboration with Project Hope, HAF took an essential step by adjusting its empowerment team's Imagine methodology to conduct a series of psychosocial workshops for the benefit of women living in the affected areas. Originally, the plan for October was to target nine villages in the Al Haouz province, aiming to have 225 women (25 per village) attend a session per week for a month. However, the response from the communities exceeded expectations, totaling 279 women.

To ensure that women could attend the training without concerns about childcare, the project thoughtfully hired educators to look after the children while their mothers participated in the sessions. Three dedicated teams were formed for these psychosocial empowerment sessions. Each team comprised two empowerment facilitators, a teacher, a psychologist, and a driver. Moreover, the teams set up large tents capable of accommodating more than 25 women, and they ensured that both breakfast and lunch were provided to create a comfortable and nurturing environment.

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



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Dear Debashis Chakrabarti, Thank you for your interesting article. It would be very helpful if you provided us with details...

The primary objective of these psychosocial sessions is to help women and their children overcome and prevent severe psychological problems that can emerge following a traumatic event. These workshops also play a crucial role in helping families and communities return to a state of normalcy in terms of their relationships and social dynamics. Moreover, these sessions empower women to leverage their own resources and resilience to cope with the difficult circumstances they find themselves.

To create a safe and nurturing environment within the community, we establish a dedicated space that prioritized quiet, privacy, and important elements such as ample lighting, proper air circulation, and comfortable seating. This safe space, a tent usually provided by the HAF, aims to foster a non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere where individuals can comfortably explore their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Our psychosocial and empowerment sessions delve into understanding resilience and stress, unraveling common reactions to disasters and the varied ways stress can manifest – cognitively, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and behaviorally.

Through this exploration, we introduce the concept of resilience, both at an individual and community level, highlighting its positive impact on the journey towards embracing the “new normal.” Importantly, we normalize common and individual experiences, assuring participants that their feelings and reactions are entirely valid, offering the necessary validation for their unique journeys.

The second session is a journey of emotional understanding which involves exploring the complexity of emotions. These emotions range from simple to intricate, with varying intensities, such as frustration, upset, or rage. With the 10 villages, the workshop teams explored how multiple emotions can blend, like experiencing grief alongside anger, sadness, or guilt.

Understanding the subjective nature of expressing emotions is a key aspect. Therefore, we focus on emotional management, clearing our minds, and recognizing the natural ebb and flow of emotions, acknowledging that we all have ups and downs.



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Furthermore, both facilitators and participants take a deeper dive into grief, a significant emotion often experienced after disasters, as it helps us process various losses. Lastly, we challenge the misconception about vulnerability – and that it's not a sign of weakness but a means to create a healing space within our community. Learning to be vulnerable, expressing our emotions, and building trust with others are vital steps in equipping ourselves to cope with whatever challenges come our way.

In the third and fourth sessions, we collaborate as facilitators and participants to achieve several goals. Firstly, exploring vulnerability and dispelling the misconception that it signifies weakness. Learning to be vulnerable and trusting others with our emotions is a crucial aspect of community healing. Equipping ourselves with this knowledge empowers us to cope with life's challenges, either independently or with trusted individuals. Next, we focus on embracing our inner resilience and finding the courage needed for our recovery journey, having learned to address and manage our emotions effectively. We also tackle the task of facing and conquering fear. Additionally, we'll delve into the concept of organic growth, exploring its significance in our path toward healing and growth.

As a member of Team 2, I was personally responsible for assisting four villages in the Ijoukak municipality of Al Haouz and one village in the Taroudant province. Some of these communities in the High Atlas were already familiar with HAF, having benefited from previous initiatives such as tree-planting, capacity-building workshops, and women's empowerment workshops.

When I was informed that HAF will be facilitating these sessions, I didn't deny the fact that I felt fear of not being able to provide emotional support to the people who had lost their close family members, friends, and homes. I, myself, believed that I was traumatized after the earthquake and needed emotional support too. However, the moment I said hello to the first community in Ijoukak, I knew that I had to set aside my worries and prepare myself for the work ahead.

The travel to these distant and frequently inaccessible regions presented numerous difficulties, particularly due to dangerous roads that further complicated access. However, it was during these challenging journeys that I began to appreciate the enormity of the task at hand and the significance of our mission.

As we continued our work in these areas, I was filled with a sense of hope and purpose. The support we are providing extends beyond immediate relief; it is about empowering these communities to regain a sense of self-sufficiency. This experience has reaffirmed my belief in the power of community, resilience, and the importance of organizations like the High Atlas Foundation and Project Hope in times of crisis.

During the psychosocial empowerment workshops, it was heartening to see the women of these villages come together, despite their own personal struggles, to support one another. The sessions aimed at helping them cope with the psychological aftermath of the earthquake and rebuild their social connections. The commitment and strength displayed by these women were truly inspiring.

Usually, the HAF empowerment team conducts four-days workshops in a successive way. However, this time, the HAF and Hope Project decided to visit the communities once a week over a period of four weeks. Therefore, by the end of each session, community members would know that we would return the following week, and this feeling would make them believe that we care enough about them to dedicate a day each week to their well-being.

While the members of these communities shared similar concerns, the level of resilience within each group varied widely. The first week was challenging for me, as 90% of the individuals in the community were still dealing with the emotional trauma and shock from the earthquake. I cannot forget the look on Fatima's face, a woman in Ijoukak, as she bitterly expressed that she and her children were terribly traumatized by the loss of everything and the fact that they couldn't change their reality. Nor could I

forget the tears and silence of Zina, who lost her husband, two daughters, father, and stepmother in front of her eyes that night while having dinner, and she wasn't able to rescue any of them.

These workshops aimed to provide a safe space for individuals like Fatima and Zina to share their experiences, express their emotions, and begin the healing process. As the sessions progressed, a sense of camaraderie and mutual support began to emerge among the participants. People who had previously felt isolated now found solace in the shared understanding of their pain and the journey toward recovery. The workshops became a crucial cornerstone in rebuilding not only the physical structures of the villages but also the emotional well-being of their inhabitants. By the end of the fourth session, all the groups we visited suggested coming together once a week to support one another in managing their emotional well-being.

In conclusion, my involvement in this initiative has not only given me a deeper appreciation for the strength of the human spirit but has also highlighted the significance of continued efforts to support these communities on their journey to recovery and healing.

Houria Chouhab

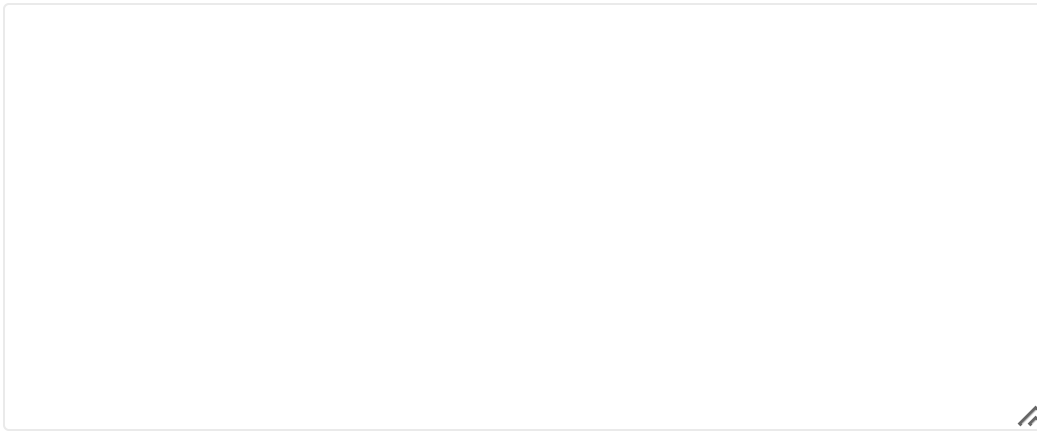
Houria Chouhab is a Psychosocial and Empowerment Trainer with the High Atlas Foundation.

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