

## Seeds of Hope Now Blooming in Aghbar

The High Atlas Foundation's earthquake relief efforts are coming to fruition in Aghbar.

By Spencer Opatrny



In September 2023, a devastating earthquake struck Morocco's Al Haouz Province. Thousands of casualties were recorded. Significant damage was caused to homes and crucial infrastructure. Families grieved the loss of life and years of work.

In the wake of the disaster, coordinated relief efforts spread throughout the country. The [High Atlas Foundation](#) responded immediately, looking to identify areas of greatest need and provide aid in areas not attended to by authorities or other major relief organizations.

One area HAF engaged with is [Aghbar](#), a municipality of 22 villages set in the High Atlas mountains. The community is very near the epicenter of the earthquake, leading to greater damage inflicted upon the rural villages. HAF identified Aghbar as an area of great need as they were overlooked in major relief efforts. In the immediate aftermath, HAF provided critical survival support to people there.

Last week, UVA interns at HAF had the opportunity to stay in the area and engage closely with communities affected. The peaceful greenery of the mountains was a contrast to the bustling city center of Marrakech in which most of the internship work occurs. This provided invaluable first-hand experience of the direct impact work at the office has in the field.

Upon arriving, we were met with an unimaginably warm welcome. As our cars pulled in, an excited commotion began with the people surrounding us. Young kids came running down the hills to greet us. Adults stood in

traditional wear, lining the streets smiling and waving. As we walked in, a crowd formed and we began marching as a unit through the village to the sound of a traditional Amazhir welcome song. If it weren't for the crumbling buildings lining the streets, nobody could have known the grief endured by this community less than a year ago.

HAF has engaged with all 22 villages in Aghbar, providing survival boxes with food, clothing, sleeping bags, and blankets after the initial impact. In addition, HAF initiated community meetings with 3 villages in the area. These meetings led to projects that became HAF's [earthquake relief](#) initiative, a blueprint for long-term development partnerships with Moroccan communities. The tenets of this dynamic relief program are food & immediate needs, water infrastructure, intermediate housing, psychosocial support, and terracing. These needs came as a direct result of community meetings, so they can be sure to point to desirable outcomes.

We walked the streets alongside a water canal and large basin built as a result of HAF projects. This water infrastructure has a significant impact on the health, agriculture, livestock, and livelihood of the community members. Almost 8,000 individuals have directly benefited from basins built by HAF and more are in progress. Further, HAF has provided 115 intermediate housing units, 46 psychosocial workshops, and 309 terraces to communities suffering from earthquake damage. In total, their impact has reached almost 86,000 individuals [and counting](#), made possible by donors such as [King Baudouin Foundation](#), [Project Hope](#), [Hilton Foundation](#), [Annenberg Foundation](#), and [Apple](#).

The reason for the visit was an invitation extended by the community to celebrate and show appreciation for all of the help that HAF had provided in the aftermath of the earthquake. The festivities were a conclusion of the major projects occurring in the three villages HAF initially engaged with. The celebration was grand. We ate delicious three or four course traditional Moroccan meals. Dance ceremonies where we stood arm-in-arm with community members went on for hours with drums, clapping, and singing. We even wore colorful traditional clothing as we jumped and tapped our feet.

Before leaving, the leader of Aghbar took the time to gather everyone in a circle and individually recognize each member of HAF who had assisted in the development of their communities. It was a heartwarming experience watching each person walk up to collect a certificate of achievement and receive a chorus of applause, a moment of genuine connection and joy. There was never a dull moment in the two days spent in the rural area.

Although work is concluding with the three villages celebrating this past week, HAF will immediately begin working on new water infrastructure and housing in three new villages in Aghbar. No community is ever without issues, but through the power of HAF's participatory development philosophy, desirable change is brought to fruition for community members. HAF is committed to the never ending journey of sustainable development and will continue to engage in these community-led initiatives from planting seeds to seeing them bloom.

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