03/04
2025

Universities are Essential to Scaling Sustainable Development

By Yossef Ben-Meir

Sustainable development encompasses broad goals, often pursued at the national level, but development policy and practice must remain aware of significant diverse conditions among the localities that these goals are meant to serve. To this end, outcomes are driven by the efforts and actions of local community groups and individuals. No single entity or demographic should solely bear the responsibility for supporting local people in charting the course of their development. Participants with wide-ranging backgrounds must all be part of this enormous effort as an indelible part of alleviating poverty and achieving sustainability.

To the extent societies are able to advance development movements driven by the beneficiaries, we need facilitators (https://...ve-wp/2019/08/30-Housing-Yossef-English.pdf) of group dialogue on personal and ... actions to improve life conditions. Communities of people do not spontaneously ...tors who catalyze bringing us together. They help ensure all voices are represented ... environmental projects going forward. They help resolve interests that seem divergent, build multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve local goals, and over time help overcome traditional or historic barriers to economic and social engagement. Critically, university students are in a particularly crucial position (https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9780313391019_A23551424/preview-9780313391019_A23551424.pdf) to effectively ignite local development processes towards peoples' identified and implemented projects.

As part of a learning institution, students are encouraged to data gather, analyze, and communicate the effects of social forces on people's lives, assist the development of people's own solutions to achieve their potential, and advocate across all levels and sectors to advance the implementation of community-driven projects. Students (https://books.google.co.ma/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ML08DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Parker,+Walter+C.+(2003)+Teaching+Democracy:+Unity+and+Diversity+in+Public+Life,+NY:+Teachers+College+Press.&ots=r8kzXK_Zra&sig=6MriWgT-sbovVdgwP4afvDqLIw8&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Parker%2C%20Walter%20C.%20(2003)%20Teaching%20Democracy%3A%20Unity%20and%20Diversity%20in%20Public%20Life%2C%20NY%3A%20Teachers%20College%20Press.&f=false) have the flexibility and most often feel the social commitment and even now typically gain the academic credit benefit (meet a requirement for graduation) to help communities determine and prioritize actions for social development and change. This translates into students' having critical interest and support (https://books.google.co.ma/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QNiV69vqxGUC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Stephan,+Walter+G.,+and+Vogt,+W.+Paul+(eds.)+(2004)+Education+Programs+for+Improving+Intergroup+Relations:+Theory,+Research+and+Practice,+NY:+Teachers+College+Press.&ots=PYMr9g5XoT&sig=xtWkj6B9VnFvWJNXvV2Aeo7h6CE&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Stephan%2C%20Walter%20G.%2C%20and%20Vogt%2C%20W.%20Paul%20(eds.)%20(2004)%20Education%20Programs%20for%20Improving%20Intergroup%20Relations%3A%20Theory%2C%20Research%20and%20Practice%2C%20NY%3A%20Teachers%20College%20Press.&f=false) to help them be successful facilitators for their own meaningful advantage and that of the public.

For example, in Morocco, many university students are from rural places. These students significantly benefit (https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol14/iss2/13/) from experiential learning programs—learning by doing—as an opportunity to return to their original communities, such as the Al Haouz province. The epicenter of the 2023 earthquake in Al Haouz serves as an experiential learning site where students participate in rebuilding (https://sciencestepjournal.com/integrating-experiential-learning-pedagogy-into-school-curricula-to-enhance-the-prevention-of-natural-risks-and-disasters-in-morocco-the-case-of-the-japanese-experience/). Formal partnerships with public universities expand access to these opportunities. Enhancing these partnerships requires funding for capacity-building within the universities to implement.

Investing in experiential (https://books.google.co.ma/books?hl=en&lr=&id=_xgiAwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Waterman,+Alan+(ed.)+(1997)+Service+Learning:+Applications+from+the+Research,+Mahwah,+NJ:+Lawrence+Erlbaum+Associates+Publishing.&ots=FDnasAAhOm&sig=TNV0BVfKVuSiYWSMIkKma6ru7AQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Waterman%2C%20Alan%20(ed.)%20(1997)%20Service%20Learning%3A%20Applications%20from%20the%20Research%2C%20Mahwah%2C%20NJ%3A%20Lawrence%20Erlbaum%20Associations%20Publishing.&f=false) learning programs for university students to develop skills as facilitators of empowerment and participatory planning in the villages will help communities define their projects. While they learn in real situations and advance their capacities as facilitators (or action researchers (https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/esbdjwmertler2019.pdf)—academicians dedicated to improving the conditions they are studying as part of their research design), development initiatives for clean water, irrigation canals, artisanal cooperatives, among multiple others, are prioritized and will be pursued by the community beneficiaries.

There are several key components for a highly effective guide to achieve universities' maximum contribution for building their society's shared prosperity and enduring environmental stewardship.

Conceiving a sustainable development course—as part of university discipline offerings and regional and national strategic plans—occurs [...] ing them and their partnerships with involved communities, municipalities, and [...] 7.cloudfront.net/63431891/MESA_final_book-reduced_PDF20200526-3476-13kpu97-libre.pdf?1590507380=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DIncorporating_ESD_Into_The_Secondary_Tea.pdf&Expires=1740328260&Signature=OddL6HFx1HcnBNFMY0F08cQAb8uR-jDPI3dUo6CGJVlroRKAmiveF7w20goKekkOla3dPt0yhHydAyp70FsjV0ZSydeoidrlR7RcKUfISpSsSofZfcNR-8nQD-8V3hiALdVh2~DzQ2UD5BumvTy~Wg5MWh1Na2AzxxhZaPxJdY3KQoNMwLZhWXeIHZOzzTcoocxLMPfhE5sVVLOR8TC5meoJ~uSYlLiwSoTASQEWsKFQbhIh7wlojczaN4qZoUHUoIgYh9dcdekL7ZYKjW8tp-ffgyy92kSJcokpyeSN~ukR9caUJvOLzGZNgLoewRKyizIgcchjf4pTbZA~HSB6kA__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA), it is essential to establish policies that enable the full inclusion of higher education institutions to perform key functions to achieve locally sustained development. Universities fulfilling their vast potential is possible (https://www.emiratesscholar.com/the-implementation-of-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-level-of-education-in-morocco/) in Morocco because Morocco has made it so. It has been the direct experience of the High Atlas Foundation in Morocco since 2008 that public and private universities seek formal partnerships that support practical student experiences in assisting community-based socio-economic and environmental improvement (as well as providing pro-bono legal aid (https://highatlasfoundation.org/en/insights/national-human-trafficking-awareness-month-morocco) for marginalized community groups). The prescribed actions that follow require a supportive policy environment.

Second, the methodology (https://entwicklungspolitik.uni-hohenheim.de/uploads/media/Day_4_-_Reading_text_6.pdf) that creates community participation in needs-based assessments also determines the results of development that consequently unfold. The best methodologies are a composite of local and global activities that rest upon dialogue and emphasize visualization. They require testing and adapting to particular cultural realities and continuously evolve as they become increasingly applied. They are approaches in which anyone—not only students—can be trained for facilitation in local community, village, or neighborhood settings.

Participatory methodologies also include information gathering procedures, and form an academic approach to data collecting, analysis, and knowledge building referred to as "action research. (https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=crt)" Therefore, universities are conducive settings for the formation of these locally applied, highly effective, and qualitative data gathering tools that are facilitated (by the action researcher) and are community-centered. Students are optimally positioned to implement them in their surrounding regions.

Thus, students can fulfill their coursework and discipline obligations while also performing a central function in community sustainable development in a mutually enhancing process—local change based on group analysis of people's lives. The context where students operate and the manner and extent they are encouraged to increasingly matter to society in this extraordinary way is the primary determinant of their success in this regard.

In Morocco, public and private universities are committed (https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099112723092033417/pdf/BOSIB0cd4d6aaa06708bf000a1c3d29faac.pdf) to providing their students and faculty with opportunities to engage people in this thoughtful, helpful way that delivers opportunities for communities and students all at once. Members of civil society, together with counterparts in academia, can optimally contribute (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/6/3210) to fashioning a participatory methodology that considers the local circumstances. In this way, as suitable group planning approaches for development take shape and are applied, students can be experientially trained and communities can directly benefit.

Third, writing (https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/Active%20Learning%20-%20Creating%20Excitement%20in%20the%20Classroom%20-%20Handout.pdf) about the dreams, hopes, ordeals, achievements, lessons learned, and the ebbs and flows of development journeys helps to create their intended and most beneficial outcomes. Writing in different

formats for a range of venues and languages, as well as speaking in a similarly wide variety of outlets, are forms of community advocacy [...] ey plot their own actions, but also further the needed partnerships to raise vital [...] [s://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ijshe-07-2014-0102/full/html)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ijshe-07-2014-0102/full/html) [...] to proceed. They become part of the basis for monitoring and evaluation, and [...] le.

Writing in this way about local development actions finds its way into strategic plans and recommendations to donors and financial institutions. They form a database of community development goals and social and environmental data by region that inform reporting and the basis for advocacy, project proposals, and business plans. Students are typically passionate about social justice and can be inspired to write creatively and disperse important knowledge based on their experiences. They can also work in effective teams, such as the University of Pennsylvania's International Impact Consulting (https://www.penniic.org/) and the like, in creating the technical business plans to help secure finance.

The not-for-profit High Atlas Foundation (HAF) in Morocco, for example, has also come to see that students' writing (https://highatlasfoundation.org/en/insights) begets more students and university programs coming to Morocco from around the world to join in this sincere development effort. In doing so, they advocate on behalf of Moroccan families who struggle but are able to achieve much more, and during that process attract more committed academics. Since the start of 2023, groups (https://highatlasfoundation.org/en/get-involved/academic-partnerships) of students and faculty from more than 40 universities, mostly from the United States, as well as dozens of youth programs and tourist groups, have visited HAF in Morocco and contributed to participatory development and community empowerment. This has been achieved without advertising but through students' knowledge-sharing and publications over time.

Applied academic courses with the University of Virginia (https://educationabroad.virginia.edu/info-session-uva-morocco-participatory-development-practice-2), University College London (https://assets.highatlasfoundation.org/uploads/hud_2.pdf), Princeton University (https://www.eurasiareview.com/23082023-the-paradoxical-powers-of-consensus-oped/), George Mason University (https://ica-proc.copernicus.org/articles/4/102/2021/), and University of Washington (https://highatlasfoundation.org/es/ideas/university-of-washington-students-propose-innovative-plans) have advanced this model of development. The more institutions communicate the concerned voices of people they serve, the more global consciousness and connectivity rises while the willingness to sit still dissipates.

Finally, universities should consider doing more to bring about widespread, bottom-up, community-driven change. Their experiential programs can target those academic disciplines that are more inclined towards action research and participatory methodologies, teaching students to generate qualitative, culturally-relative data for effecting positive change. Academic frameworks (https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_etds/5/) exist that provide the space for participatory research leading to community action in anthropology, women's studies, adult education, communications, public health, architectural planning, applied economics, environmental studies, and sociology. Clearly, insufficient (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13562517.2023.2222066?needAccess=true) numbers of faculty are committed and trained in these action research approaches and in the position to train students and encourage them to embark on their capstones, theses, and dissertations in this specific way.

Creating a university that houses academic disciplines legitimizing participatory action research and local change is a mission that will be a boon to its region. Realizing such a vision strengthens people's capacities to be skillful professionals, entrepreneurs, and peacemakers for society's prosperity.

By necessity, university members will collaborate with the people of the local neighborhoods, towns, and cities and advocate for them in achieving their highest goals. This participatory university reflects the time we are in, which demands ever higher commitments to aligning educational outcomes with sustainable development.

Yossef Ben-Meir is a sociologist and the president of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustainable development in Morocco.

DEVELOPMENT (/HOME/CATEGORY/DEVELOPMENT), CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT (/HOME/CATEGORY/CLIMATE+AND+ENVIRONMENT)

Middle East and North Africa (/home/tag/Middle+East+and+North+Africa), Global (/home/tag/Global)

f Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.fletcherforum.org%2Fhome%2F3%2F4%2F2025%2Funiversities-are-essential-to-scaling

🐦 Twitter (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.fletcherforum.org%2Fhome%2F3%2F4%2F2025%2Funiversities-are-essential-to-scaling-sustainable-d

📌 Pinterest (https://www.pinterest.com/pin/create/link/?description=&media=https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/579fc2ad725e253a86230610/1741145260349-KOXEU

💗 1 Like

‹