

Middle East Times

Middle East Times

Commentary: Morocco and the Western Sahara

By Yossef Ben-Meir
Special to the Middle East Times

Published May 25, 2007

It is in the interest of Morocco at this time to significantly help advance the process of enabling the population of Western Sahara to experience autonomy in the socio-economic development sector.

Specifically, the Moroccan government ought to catalyze and support broad participation of the people of Western Sahara in the planning and management of local development projects. This will bring into reality important ideas the Moroccan government recently set forth in their proposal to the UN Security Council for autonomy for the Sahara region, and help create a resolution to the 30 year-old conflict that is consistent with Morocco's overall objectives and that of the population of Western Sahara.

The participation of local community members in the determination and implementation of projects that meet their vital needs is an expression of federalist democracy and autonomy. Morocco making possible this empowering form of community development will help clarify for the people of Western Sahara a relationship they can forge with Rabat that genuinely helps further their self-described local and regional goals. Also, if communities in Western Sahara achieve socio-economic development based on their own ideas for development, and they see the Moroccan government playing an indispensable supportive role, then this will aid Morocco in a future referendum on autonomy.

Indeed, Morocco should create the conditions whereby the Western Saharan population perceives "autonomy within Moroccan sovereignty" (Morocco's stated position) as providing the best opportunity to significantly advance community interests and development. Morocco's support (in the form of investment, training, and providing an enabling political environment) of participation in development would improve its relationships with Western Saharan communities and advance reconciliation, since the process builds social capital.

Based on a cost-benefit projection taken from a rural development initiative for a remote area in Morocco, a \$25 million budget over a two-year project duration will enable approximately 100,000 people to determine and implement development projects that generate wide-ranging socio-economic benefits (jobs, income, education, and health).

The process begins by transferring skills to local people (teachers, government and non-government personnel, and community leaders and members) in organizing and facilitating

community planning meetings that are based on dialogue and that encourage all interested groups and individuals to take part.

Morocco's autonomy proposal suggests a transition phase, as did some earlier proposals to help resolve the conflict. Morocco should spare no effort during a transition, or even now having submitted their autonomy plan to the UN Security Council that drew a supportive resolution in response, to promote participation in development in Western Sahara.

This will strengthen Morocco's bond to the region through the local population's increased desire to do so. Participatory community development in the Western Sahara spearheaded by Morocco can create a new reality that will lead to the fulfillment of Morocco's essential interests while allowing for conditions of self-determination sought by Saharan people.

Yossef Ben-Meir teaches sociology at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque. He is a former Peace Corps Morocco volunteer and associate director, and currently serves as president of the High Atlas Foundation - a non profit organization that supports rural development in Morocco. The position described in the article is the author's and not the organizations he is associated with. Ben-Meir submitted this article to the Middle East Times.

+++
+++
+++

READER RESPONSE TO ARTICLE

By Charles Liebling

How does Yossef Ben-Meir suggest Morocco "significantly help advance the process of enabling the population of Western Sahara to experience autonomy in the socio-economic development sector?"

The broad outlines of his plan are quoted in the following paragraph:

"Specifically, the Moroccan government ought to catalyze and support broad participation of the people of Western Sahara in the planning and management of local development projects. This will bring into reality important ideas the Moroccan government recently set forth in their proposal to the UN Security Council for autonomy for the Sahara region, and help create a resolution to the 30-year-old conflict that is consistent with Morocco's overall objectives and that of the population of Western Sahara."

Mr. Ben-Meir elaborates further by saying: "a \$25 million budget over a two-year project duration will enable approximately 100,000 people to determine and implement development projects that generate wide-ranging socio-economic benefits (jobs, income, education, and health)."

Finally, he concludes that: "this will strengthen Morocco's bond to the region through the local population's increased desire to do so. Participatory community development in the Western Sahara spearheaded by Morocco can create a new reality that will lead to the fulfillment of Morocco's essential interests while allowing for conditions of self-determination sought by Saharan people."

However, what sounds, on the surface, like a nice idea to help out the poor Western Saharans is, in fact, a thinly-veiled plan to consolidate Morocco's brutal and illegal occupation of the territory by buying off the local inhabitants.

Indeed, Mr. Ben-Meir's commentary is most notable for what it leaves out rather than what it says.

So, just what does it leave out?

Firstly, it omits the fact that the Polisario Front, which is recognized as the representative of the Western Saharans by the UN, and with whom the Moroccan government signed a peace treaty in 1991, has categorically rejected Morocco's autonomy plan. The Polisario rejects autonomy, and Morocco, by refusing to hold a referendum on independence as mandated by the UN, is denying the Western Saharan people their right to exercise real self-determination (where independence is an option).

Secondly, the commentary leaves out the fact that any imposition of autonomy is contrary to international law. The UN has ruled repeatedly that Morocco does not have the right to choose the Western Sahara's future. It is an occupying power and no country recognizes Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

Thirdly, it fails to mention the fact that \$25 million is a drop in the bucket compared to the huge cost of Morocco's unpopular and brutal occupation, estimated at between \$500 million and \$1 billion - not to mention the billions of dollars Morocco receives from exploiting the territory's fishing and phosphate wealth.

And fourthly, the commentary neglects to mention that, as I write, demonstrations for independence and against the Moroccan occupation are taking place throughout the Western Sahara and at Moroccan universities. All indications are that the Western Saharans want the Moroccans out of their land and want nothing to do with any attempts by Rabat to strengthen its hold over the territory.

My point, ultimately, is that Mr. Ben-Meir is proposing to buy off the Western Saharans with a miniscule sum to consolidate an autonomy plan that is widely rejected by the affected population. It just won't work.

Mr. Ben-Meir's assertions that his development plan and Morocco's autonomy plan are consistent with the "overall objectives of the population of Western Sahara" and allow for "conditions of self-determination sought by Saharan people" are simply not consistent with international legality and the reality on the ground.

Copyright © 2007 News World Communications, Inc. All rights reserved.

[Return to the index](#)