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Countering extremism through human development

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Vulnerability is a common denominator shared by many people in Morocco, including students and recent, jobless graduates and youthful, former prison detainees.

These two groups actually have more in common than might appear at first sight. A significant proportion of young Moroccans who manage to make it through high school to university grow up, together with their peers who may drop out at an early age, in some of the country's toughest locations, where systemic poverty and deep social inequality throw life into a constant state of disruption.

With or without the benefit of formal educational opportunities, young people who are economically disenfranchised and struggling to balance several political, social, ethnic and religious narratives can be more easily attracted towards sympathy for radical ideologies and violent action.

Moreover, this vulnerability works against existing peace and security initiatives by decreasing the effectiveness of human development efforts, driving the most vulnerable still further towards extremist tendencies and active networks.

All this is set in the context of the high general unemployment rate in Morocco of around 9%, which is dramatically higher among the young, including recent graduates, for whom the level has exceeded 30% in recent years.

Two particular schemes currently in place for students and recent graduates may be extended in the future to former non-violent detainees, offering vital stability as well as aiming to counter violent extremism.

Both initiatives are the brainchild of the High Atlas Foundation or HAF, a Moroccan-United States non-profit organisation founded in 2000, which aims to be a catalyst for grassroots development in vulnerable communities throughout Morocco by facilitating participatory development programmes, based on proven techniques.

Change agents in Mohammedia and Fes

Despite improvements in Morocco's higher education system, getting regional universities to apply academic knowledge in an effective, even innovative fashion within the workplace remains a challenge. Essentially, the issue is the lack of relevance of many university training programmes to the realities of job market needs and of regional and local growth strategies.

Student Mohammed Idrissi Guartomi's comment is typical of what many think: "I am about to get my law degree, but it seems that my dream to become a lawyer will never come true."

To counter this, in 2008 HAF, in partnership with Hassan II University's faculty of law, economics, and social sciences in Mohammedia, created the Center for Community Consensus-Building and Sustainable Development.

The centre offers students as well as young members of local civil society organisations, or CSOs, a range of training and capacity-building programmes, grounded in participatory methodology and experiential learning techniques.

From this safe vantage point, participants express their ideas and opinions, master applied skills and develop practical innovations of their own. What they gain is a sense of empowerment, as well as the tools necessary to bring about real socio-economic change in their own lives and communities.

Since its opening, the centre has become a hub for capacity building, planning and dialogue, where more than 100 locally elected officials, 150 CSO members and 450 university students have met to network, exchange advice and guidance and build capacity in the areas of participatory analysis, strategic planning, project design and management and advocacy.

Before his eventual graduation, Mohammed Idrissi Guartomi was among a group of 15 law students who advocated successfully for faculty managers to set up a law clinic where students have the chance to practise their vocation.

Meanwhile, a HAF team designed and secured the necessary funding for a year-long legal aid programme that took place in the 2014-15 academic year. A total of 55 law students benefited from this programme to gain additional theoretical and technical skills through role-play and working on case studies. At the same time, students provided a free legal aid service to selected local CSOs, activists and communities.

All of this has had a profoundly positive impact in three ways. Law student Ayoub Al Horr noted: "Wearing a lawyer's suit and standing in front of my colleagues to present and advocate on behalf of a community association helped me realise not only the complicated aspects of the profession but also the career path I want to pursue."

Undergraduates are empowered not only to become shapers of their own learning and future professional focus but also to play a critical role in building public support for change and engaging others in that process.

They have succeeded, too, in changing the culture so that the faculty is now examining innovative ways of offering improved training opportunities for its students, while delivering services in a way that ensures citizen's full access to the civil justice system.

This particular programme has brought tremendous improvement to the organisational management of 18 selected CSOs. Each benefited from five hours per week of dedicated voluntary service during which students helped them review their bylaws, facilitate board meetings and actively participated in efforts to design and develop community development initiatives.

Fatma Al Achkar, president of Al Bochra women's association in the commune of Ain Harrouda, commented: "Access for [our] association to legal aid services made the difference between poverty and self-sufficiency for an association serving a poor community. This programme has not only helped us improve how our association performs, but it has helped improve our lives."

Building on this success, HAF was invited to train and coach undergraduates as change agents at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes, one of many universities in Morocco known for violent clashes, both internally between student political groups and between these groups and police.

All participants were identified as vulnerable to adopting radical ideologies and accompanying violent action, yet expressed a desire and motivation to change, lead and improve their own lives.

During the course of the 2015-16 academic year, 70 students from the faculty of literature and human sciences have been benefiting from a training curriculum based on experiential learning in authentic community settings. As in Mohammedia, they are able to build their project management skills while supporting rural communities in identifying, implementing and evaluating key local human development initiatives.

Once again, the tangible benefits for all are clear and from the students' point of view this further helps to boost their sense of achievement and self-esteem. Moreover, it was demonstrated that environmental factors conducive to political violence among students were significantly reduced.

Oummat Salaam: beyond borders

To extend this success to another part of Morocco's youthful population, HAF is looking for funding for a project aimed at benefiting non-violent former prisoners. As before, the overarching goal of the programme would be to develop resilient communities whose members gain the agency to mobilise economic, political and social interconnections.

In addition, at the same time as enhancing volunteer participants' professional and personal capacities, their prospects for genuine integration into mainstream society would improve.

Explicit in the terms of this project is the aim of reducing the environmental conditions that support radicalisation and the desire to become a foreign fighter in a terrorist organisation.

The project's implications could be far-reaching too in the sense that, while it would commence in Morocco, with the recording of measurable success it could extend its reach throughout the Middle East and North Africa or MENA region.

In theory, a first initiative would last for 30 months, offering participants a full 24 months in the field, framed by six months during which HAF would open and close the project. A suggested 40 individuals would be assessed as before for their suitability as change agents – 10 recent college graduates together with 30 released detainees from three Moroccan provinces.

Convicted of non-violent offences, this latter group would be drawn from those with a broad range of educational experience, ranging from illiteracy and non-completion of high school through to university attendance.

While young men would be expected to make up the majority of participants, as statistically Moroccan women prisoners are less active in radicalism and violence due to cultural factors, the question of gender interaction during the scheme would be addressed with great sensitivity.

Nearly 80% of prison detainees who underwent similar, comprehensive programmes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Yemen were fully rehabilitated into society and went on to become role models.

Other studies have shown that programmes supporting opportunities for livelihoods, such as vocational training and job placement assistance, can mitigate the economic conditions that are conducive to radicalisation and recruitment.

Broad participation and cultural sensitivity

The level of success is greatly dependent on the degree of genuine grassroots involvement. Broad participation in community development marginalises religious and secular political extremists by strengthening indigenous democratic processes (which are themselves more likely to succeed) that generate economic prosperity.

Community empowerment occurs through a gradual, non-violent and widely accepted process because of the many collective and individual benefits the community experiences as a result of engaging in inclusive, direct dialogue in planning development projects of which the communities themselves are beneficiaries. As people achieve their own interests, they feel less alienation; their zone of tolerance also expands because the underlying conditions that fuel extremism are directly addressed.

As a result, beneficiaries are less likely to channel hatred towards outside actors. The more people come to reap the fruits of the local development approach, the more they will be emboldened to fight extremism existing within their own countries.

Yet project success is dependent too on the sensitivity accorded to a specific context, in this case to Moroccan Muslim culture in general and its youth in particular.

For most, the period of adolescence and just beyond is critical in achieving independence and autonomy and in defining self-identity. For many young people, in Morocco and worldwide, the very notion of self-identity is in crisis, particularly in the wake of fast-paced societal transition.

Earlier blueprints, however limiting, were clearly defined. Now they have been displaced on the one hand by attempts to forge something modern, coherent and meaningful but which largely fail young people; and on the other, by distorted, radically over-simplified interpretations of tradition, which seek to indoctrinate youth.

The dominant recurring theme in interviews conducted by HAF with university students who had crossed the threshold and begun a process of indoctrination was that all of them were searching for their purpose in life.

Islamic scholar Homayra Ziad writes: "It is telling that much of the recruitment discourse of terrorist organisations like ISIS centres on questions of justice. This discourse provides youth who are nominally Muslim with an identity that is unambiguous and based on zealotry, absolute certainty and absolute truth. It provides them with a community and with a cause. It gives marginalised youth the idea that they are fighting for justice in an unjust world order."

The project proposes to serve youth by promoting to them an alternative, truly productive cause to which they may direct their energies. In practical terms, it translates into benefits for them, as participants in bringing about social justice for communities brought about through grassroots human development.

Youth actors and a distinguished concept

The chosen name of Oummat Salaam or Peace Nation reflects the rooting of the programme firmly in the Moroccan and MENA context, thus bestowing a sense of ownership by and control for the intended

beneficiaries. It also signifies the wish to reclaim terminology that has been co-opted more recently by some radical groups.

HAF takes its cue from Islamic scholars who regard the term 'Oummat' in a universal way. Classically, it suggests human acceptance and connectivity framed within the context of a global, borderless society. The Oummat envisaged by this programme has in it a place for everyone; moreover, this highly progressive ideal resonates with that of participatory democracy, which is central to the HAF ethos.

In essence, the process of re-appropriating a linguistic concept parallels beautifully that of channelling dynamic, youthful energy for productive means. Rather than dropping into an abyss, both are uplifted, liberated in the true sense of the word and their true potential brought to the fore.

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Comment

Understanding extremism is not rocket science. In addition to unemployment and poverty, which can lead to alienation, despair, and hopelessness, it is also fuelled by state-sponsored terrorism, which creates the conditions for hatred and a desire for revenge.

Something else that would help "counter extremism" would be to eliminate some of its causes. These include the US ending its undeclared war on Muslim countries via drone missile strikes and other military actions.

President Obama has bombed no fewer than seven predominantly Muslim countries since he has been in office, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. He's put his predecessor to shame in terms of his enthusiastic use of drone strikes.

One other obvious point is that the Middle East would be a very different place today, if the US had not invaded and occupied Iraq, which led to the destruction of that society, a mass exodus of Iraqis, and the destabilisation of an entire region. This crime was one of the primary causes of the emergence of Iraq as Terrorism, Inc. and the current refugee crisis. Blowback's a bitch, as they say.

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