

Dialogue of Civilizations Through Community Development

By
Jason Ben-Meir

Community-wide participation in the design and management of development projects creates prosperity through a pluralist democratic process. If Western countries doubled their foreign aid to finance such projects in Islamic nations, an era of regional stability and international security will also be created.

There are many examples around the world of community-designed projects that successfully diversify incomes, provide food and healthcare, further education, preserve natural resources, and forge public-private partnerships. In the process of communities working together to realize their development goals, local associations (civil-society institutions) are created. New tiers of cooperation then form as neighboring communities join together in implementing projects that benefit their entire region. Thus, achieving local development through inclusive community dialogue has economic and political consequences. These important diverse benefits would be especially helpful for Arab and Muslim nations when considering their development needs and what is required to enhance international security.

In Iraq and Afghanistan where reconstruction is essential, meetings with broad public participation should be organized in every community across both countries. In these meetings, which require facilitation, local people should prioritize their development goals and design projects that meet their needs. Community members, local teachers, government extensionists, NGO



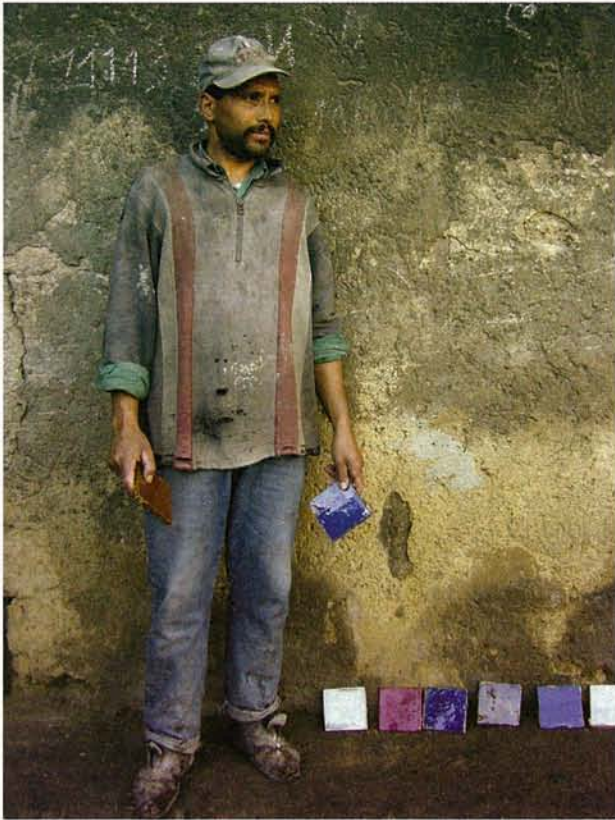
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personnel, and others can all be effective facilitators once they receive training in consensus building techniques, as well as techniques that help organize interactive dialogue. The coalition partners, led by the United States, need to fund the projects that communities design, implement, and manage by themselves. This funding will strongly encourage the local population of both countries to have ownership of the reconstruction of their nations—a necessity for sustainable economic and political development.

Billions of dollars spent in reconstruction contracts with foreign companies disempowers local communities and can foster resentment towards the international coalition, particularly the United States. American soldiers administering aid for projects requested by

local leaders offers no guarantee that those projects were collaboratively designed in community-wide meetings and accurately reflect the real priorities of local people. Lessons from development interventions around the world over decades indicate that long-term sustainability of projects is undermined by conducting development in this way. Indigenous capacities to manage development cannot reach their potential when local people are not in full control of rebuilding major sectors of their economic life.

Lasting development and genuine reconstruction require establishing projects designed by entire local communities. The very nature of these projects ensures that the needs of local people are being met. And, in turn, they maintain the projects because it is in



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for Jordan and Morocco if they don't rely on local participation in dealing with the issue of free-trade, we have only to look as near as Mexico and the effect of NAFTA on its farmers, such as a drop in prices for farm products, lower land prices, a decrease in demand for agricultural laborers, and urban migration. New projects suggested by Moroccan and Jordanian communities that can help them adjust to free-trade include reliance on modern agricultural methods, fruit and forestry tree planting, potable water, environmental enhancement, school construction, women's cooperatives, tourism, and artisanal crafts. As one community member expressed in an open

forum meeting in southern Morocco, "We would not want to move to the cities if we had the means to achieve the goals of our village."

Several studies show that Morocco, currently negotiating with the U.S. an agreement that will phase in free-trade over a 10 to 15 year period, needs four billion dollars to implement development projects that diversify the incomes of its rural communities. Secretary of State Colin Powell announced during his December 2003 visit to Morocco a fourfold increase in economic aid (to roughly \$170 million over three years). The international community, however, needs to do far more than traditional aid practices. It must actively support projects local people design because this is one of the most effective methods of erasing and preventing discontent. This is why it is imperative that American and European Ambassadors serving in Morocco and Jordan and their host-country counterparts in Europe and America develop a concerted strategy for raising funds for local development. For example, part of

any effective fundraising strategy would include organizing international donor conferences. Fundraising events should also be organized that directly appeal to private individuals inside and outside Jordan and Morocco that can make significant contributions to their nations' community development. Our and their ambassadors should also personally encourage foreign corporations operating in both nations to increase any developmental assistance they currently provide. From the existing evidence, a compelling case can be made to show how this aid would be in their best interests.

In 2003, this writer was part of an interactive dialogue process among community members, government officials, and NGO representatives in Morocco that resulted into a \$10 million development plan for High Atlas communities. This plan when put into effect will significantly advance the economic development of 50,000 rural people. Based on these figures, it was estimated that \$4 billion dollars to fund community-designed development can bring prosperity to Morocco's 17 million rural people. This relatively low cost projected for the rural development of Morocco is achievable by establishing community-designed projects, which have a very high rate of success. An additional benefit of training local people in organizing meetings and facilitating dialogue among all potential stakeholders is that it can decrease development administration costs to roughly 5 percent of the total investment. This savings allows for a larger proportion of funds to be spent on materials to implement local initiatives.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Of course, resolution of the debilitating Israeli-Palestinian conflict is paramount to achieving regional stability and for putting Western-Islamic relations on a more trustful and productive footing. The current mutually destructive situation has made most of the Israeli public and leaders support physical separation with the Palestinians, which construction of the West Bank fence

their best interests. Funding projects across Iraq and Afghanistan developed by local communities through facilitated interactive dialogue will significantly facilitate the creation of an economic and political transformation in a few years. The process will also further marginalize secular and religious extremists in both countries, as will be discussed.

U.S. and E.U. Free-Trade with Morocco and Jordan

Rural communities designing and implementing their own projects has shown to diversify their incomes. Diversification in turn can prevent the displacement of farmers caused by international free-trade. U.S. and European Union free-trade with Jordan and Morocco make it critical that these moderate Islamic countries invest heavily in rural development that is based on broad local participation. For example, the cereals they grow with traditional methods cannot compete with government-subsidized Western agricultural production. To see what is in store

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exemplifies. Some Palestinian officials are now also suggesting that a separation would be acceptable, even considering the increased economic hardships that would certainly ensue, if it also included full political separation along acceptable geographic borders.

Currently, the Palestinians face continued economic dependence on Israel, underdevelopment, and low industrialization. Israel's trade and labor restrictions imposed to enhance its security have decreased the Palestinians' standard of living. Approximately 90% of all imports to the West Bank and Gaza are from Israel and 80% of all exports from the territories are to Israel. In 1988, during the first uprising, over half of the Palestinian labor force worked in Israel. Subsequently, there has been a 60% decrease, with Israel compensating by importing foreign replacements.

Case studies from every continent around the world (and from most every country) show that local and national self-reliance is fostered when community members collaboratively design and implement projects to enhance their lives. Self-reliance is

generated because interactive dialogue among community members draws forth information from a variety of perspectives, which then enhances the abilities of the participants to make informed decisions. Studies also show that self-reliance is encouraged when projects are established based on local capacities and know-how. If this development approach were widely applied in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians and Israelis will mutually benefit. Palestinian economic self-reliance will in time encourage economic and political equality with Israel and set the stage for a future integration that in itself would stabilize Israeli-Palestinian political relations and enhance the prospects for peace.

Israel and the international community can generate tremendous good will and severely lessen the short-run Palestinian costs of self-reliance by directly funding community projects in the West Bank and Gaza designed and managed by local Palestinians. According to officials in the state department, the Palestinian Authority currently exerts monopolistic control over essential commodities, including petroleum, gravel, flour, and sugar, in the territories. The World Bank, Israel, the U.S., NGOs, and the international community should strongly encourage the Palestinian Authority to more actively support local development initiatives rather than act as a competitor. For example, implementation of locally designed projects more often than not requires building materials, so Palestinian Authority

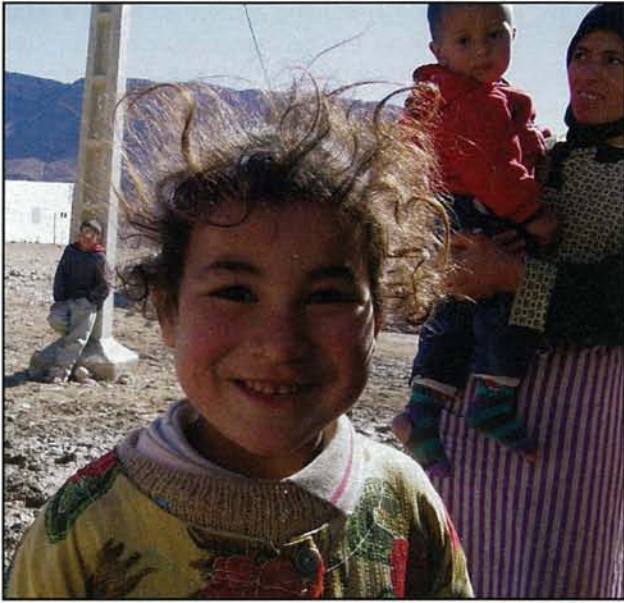
support can be in the form of providing some of these materials.

Islamic Extremism

In December 2002 speaking before the Heritage Foundation on the emergence of Islamic extremist movements, Secretary of State Powell said, "A shortage of economic opportunities is a ticket to despair. Combined with rigid political systems, it is a dangerous brew indeed." Broad participation in community development strengthens indigenous democratic processes (which are themselves more likely to succeed) through the collaborative design process of projects that generate economic prosperity. As many experienced observers have noted, inclusive direct dialogue among community members (including women) for planning local development is inherently political and democratic. Community empowerment occurs in a gradual, non-violent and, as examples show, generally accepted way because of the collective and individual benefits the process provides. This marginalizes both secular and religious extremists. As people achieve their own interests and suffer less alienation, their zone of tolerance expands because the underlying conditions that fuel extremism are being directly addressed. People then are less likely to channel hatred against outside actors or allow themselves to be used by others as a destructive tool. Additionally, in the Muslim world, as the majority of people in communities,

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Photographs by Richard Futrell



regions, and nations come to reap the benefits of this local development approach, they themselves will more boldly work against extremism within their own countries.

Public Diplomacy

With the Muslim world's public perception of America at an all time low, the recently confirmed Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Margaret Tutwiler, has an enormous task of building favorable impressions of the U.S. The September 2003 report on public diplomacy by the U.S. General Accounting Office stated that in Egypt, for example, the second largest recipient of U.S. assistance, "only a small percentage of the population was aware of the magnitude of the aid." In October 2003, the State Department sponsored study of American public diplomacy in the Muslim world issued their report and found that Egyptians are thankful to the Japanese for funding their opera house, but were "unaware that the U.S. funded the Cairo sewer, drinking water, and electrical system and played a key role in reducing infant mortality." The report also explains that in recent years the United States increased its assistance to Jordan, but this was accompanied by a dramatic worsening of public attitudes toward the U.S., with just 1 percent of Jordanians

holding a favorable view of the U.S. Of course, U.S. policies in the Middle East, especially in regards to Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, will greatly determine the success of public diplomacy measures, which include educational, media outreach, and interactive programs.

If communities are not fully engaged in the design, implementation, and management of projects that impact their lives, as evidence suggests is too often the case in the state-to-state aid the U.S. provides Egypt and Jordan, then foreign aid as a tool of public diplomacy will be ineffectual. U.S. support of locally designed projects generates enormous public good-will and is an extremely effective form of public diplomacy. By engaging whole communities, people will feel they are involved in a development process that is responsive to them. This engenders in the beneficiaries feelings of trust and acknowledgement towards those organizations and agencies that have made the experience possible, including the providers of financial assistance. Further, the trust that is built will provide the opportunity to explain American intentions in the Middle East to a more receptive audience.

Films of community meetings that take place across Egypt, Jordan, Morocco,

Iraq, Afghanistan, in a future Palestine, and other countries that show local people working together to improve their lives by creating projects funded by the U.S., will be extremely effective tools of public diplomacy. Additionally, such films can greatly help in training people, such as English teachers, in community development facilitation. At her February 2003 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, former Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs Charlotte Beers called English teachers a "secret weapon," as they are needed everywhere in the world. Training teachers that serve in Muslim nations in the skills to help bring people together for planning local development, will allow them to achieve the potential of their service by helping people achieve their goals and building more productive international partnerships. The U.S. Peace Corps should set the example and train its roughly 3,500 English teachers that volunteer around the world in community development facilitation.

In sum, if the international community, led by the United States, significantly increased their financial support for community-based economic development managed by local people, millions of people will be able to realize opportunities that seemed impossible, international relations and security will

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Initiatives that Achieve Community Development Across a Country

The following five initiatives achieve community development across a country. Their implementation in Islamic nations with the support of the international community will bring profound mutually beneficial results.

1. *Establish Agencies of Coordination:* One of the major challenges to achieving inclusive participation in development is bringing together all the interested parties into a dialogue process. An "agency of coordination" is an administrative framework that organizes and facilitates meetings among communities, government agencies, and NGOs for planning and implementing development. It has the flexibility to operate at local, provincial, national, and international levels in order to negotiate partnerships that promote the objectives of communities. Whether such an agency is governmental, an NGO, a consortium of NGOs, etc. is determined by its host-country.

An agency of coordination can also play a vital role in facilitating Arab-Israeli development cooperation. For example, several years ago when there was less tension in the Middle East, Moroccan-Israeli collaboration could have taken place. Procedurally, however, initiating it was difficult as it required interested Moroccans to contact directly the Israeli liaison office in Rabat (currently closed) and make a request for assistance. Many Moroccans interested in working with

Israel for the purpose of development often feel more comfortable working through a trusted intermediary to establish initial direct contact. As for the Israelis, MASHAV (the aid wing of Israel's Foreign Ministry) cannot initiate contact for any such act would constitute interference in Moroccan internal affairs. This condition that makes direct dialogue difficult to attain, explains in part why in over 20 years of Israeli-Egyptian peace there has been little development cooperation. Indeed, mid-level discussions among Israeli and Arab government officials are difficult to achieve even when the opportunity is there. An agency of coordination (perhaps in this case an international NGO that can contact both Arab and Israeli officials) can provide the needed role of catalyzing and helping to maintain dialogue until trust is built.

2. *Establish Community Development Planning and Training Centers:* These centers, situated in communities and locally managed, facilitate an interactive process that permits these communities to determine their priority needs and then to design and implement projects that meet those needs. Centers also provide training in facilitation, modern agriculture, health, fundraising, and other skills desired by local people. In addition, they can assist in reconciling conflicts among diverse groups. In sum, they provide one-stop shopping for community development needs and do so in ways that transfer needed skills to the local population.

Clearly, training centers can play a vital role in the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. In Morocco, there is interest among some national and provincial government officials to establish one outside of Marrakech, the first such center in their country.

3. *Democratization:* Two fundamental elements of pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power towards the interior (localities) and the inclusion of all social groups in decision making. Agencies of coordination and community planning and training centers are pluralist democratic institutions since they strengthen the capacities of communities to manage their own development. They are also extremely effective vehicles for promoting democracy through development assistance.

Community members and leaders that have acquired the skills to achieve collaborative development and experienced its enormous benefits make excellent candidates for local and national elected offices. The experience has been shown to supply them with the confidence and strategies to run for public office. They have understood that an effective political campaign is composed of a series of town hall meetings where local people are given the opportunity to express their concerns and interests. They have also understood that political parties pursuing the development goals of communities will succeed because their platform reflects the priorities of local people. They know that inclusive collaboration in the design and management of local development is a way for their nation to achieve its development potential.

Developing this kind of leadership sets the stage for political transformation from within to occur. Delaying too long

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in building democracy through community development assistance in post-conflict areas, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, only allow government officials to become more entrenched and unwilling to give up any of their political power. In the long-term, however, Western nations, especially the United States as their leader, must remember that the most genuine and effective way of encouraging pluralist democracy in the Muslim world is by example.

4. Fruit and Forestry Tree-Planting and Irrigation Improvements: Around the world, tree-planting is regularly identified by both rural and urban communities to be a top priority. Indeed, trees provide income, jobs, and enhance food production and the environment. Modern irrigation maximizes the utility of water supplies, increases yields, lays a foundation for potable water, and, by bringing water to land once barren, creates the opportunity to build schools, clinics, and other service centers. The international community should fund tree planting and irrigation improvements in viable areas and communities across the Muslim world. An additional reason is that planting a tree is considered an "act of faith" in Islam and instills genuine trust between local people and funders because of the long-term benefits it provides for individual families.

In the weeks before the war with Iraq, Under Secretary of State Tutwiler then serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, took some bold steps and acquired immediate funding from USAID to plant fruit trees in

communities - in southern Morocco. Creating good-will with Arab communities, helping to diversify the incomes of rural farmers in preparation for free-trade, and serving the needs of local people (all of which tree planting does) is public diplomacy at its best.

5. Funding Community Development: Funding is needed for agencies of coordination, planning and training centers, and, to the largest degree, for implementing projects local communities design. Ambassadors serving in Muslim nations should promote community development by organizing donor conferences and other fundraising measures as previously discussed. American Ambassadors, in particular, should appoint special envoys for community development. Their presence will help to put the full weight of the ambassador's office to help raise funds and assist in establishing local projects, such as tree planting, beyond the geographically limited USAID project sites. There is a broad spectrum of prospective donors that can be mobilized because multiple sectors (economic, social, health, education, environment, etc.) are advanced in this development approach. And as community resources improve, outside funding becomes less necessary.

In March 2002 at the United Nations development summit in Mexico, President Bush announced his intention to create a \$5 billion annual fund (above current foreign assistance levels of \$12.5 billion) to promote growth through the creation of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). MCA's core tenet is to support investments that the beneficiaries formulate in a transparent process—a tenet consistent with the development approach described here. MCA's administrators need to make certain, however, that community representatives are part of the formulation process and not just host-government agencies. Not only will this make for more sound development, but also serve public diplomacy objectives. MCA can then be a positive



example for USAID, which often formulates its own proposals for developing countries. Unfortunately, MCA is not accessible to all developing nations due to it targeting high potential investments in "high end" countries, none of which are involved in terrorism.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), announced by Secretary Powell in December 2002, was designed to address underdevelopment in the Middle East. Its promotion of civil society, education, private sector development, and equal status for women makes it a viable funding vehicle for the development strategy outlined here. However, its FY 2004 budget request of \$145 million makes it inadequate to achieve the development goals.

Even with MCA and MEPI, funding levels of foreign aid is still a depressingly small amount and not enough to achieve American foreign policy goals. Though MCA represents the largest U.S. foreign aid increase in decades and solidifies the U.S. position as the largest donor in the world, aid is still about four and a half percent of the annual Defense Department budget. As a percentage of GNP, the U.S. still ranks among the very bottom of the list of 24 nations that contribute to overseas aid (at about 0.15 percent), and is well short of the goal of 0.7 percent set by the U.N. in 1970. Part of the reason there has not been more foreign aid in prior years (and decades) is because only a few studies show a clear correlation between aid flow and economic growth in the countries to which it has distributed. But, as some observers explain, foreign aid has too often supported vain projects, military

build-ups, corrupt officials, or strictly geo-political outcomes.

Republican Representative Jim Kolbe from Arizona and chairman of the House Appropriations Foreign Operations subcommittee described foreign assistance as one leg of a three-legged national security "stool." (The diplomatic core and intelligence services comprise the second, and national defense, the third.) Foreign assistance in the form of funding community-designed projects across the Muslim world is hardly a vain enterprise; it can be the critical leg of our foreign operations, allowing us to achieve long-term peace and prosperity. To do it properly will at least require doubling the overseas aid provided by the 24 nations that together contribute roughly \$60 billion a year, which Britain officially suggested of each country shortly after 9/11. The U.S. taking the lead presents a powerful opportunity to bring the resources of other nations (including Islamic) to bear and create a multilateral initiative.

USAID's Middle East Regional Cooperation program (MERC), established as a result of the Camp David peace accords, funds projects that primarily involve Arab-Israeli joint technological development. To advance regional collaboration during this critical time, MERC should fund

projects according to the quality of Arab-Israeli partnership, regardless of whether a technological development component exists. The transfer of technology is also a primary criterion for receiving Israeli MASHAV's assistance. This requirement often seems to Arab neighbors to have the purpose of serving Israeli interests rather than those people they are trying to help. Projects that communities design to meet their needs most often do not require the imports of technology. When new technology is needed, for example pressure/drip irrigation systems for agricultural communities, it typically involves diffusion of a technology that already exists within the country.



The United States must take the lead and mobilize the financial resources of the international community (of course, first our own) to support participation in local development. This will bear dramatic benefits. Helping to achieve the self-defined goals of local communities in Islamic nations will redefine our relationships with them by the mutual trust that will be engendered and productive cooperation that will be further solidified. The alarming deterioration of our image across the world, particularly in Islamic countries, will be significantly reversed by helping to

realize the goals of local people. This kind of engagement will assist in critical ways of achieving successful public diplomacy and foster an environment where mutual understanding on broader geopolitical issues can be attained. Helping communities and individuals to design and manage their own development will marginalize secular and religious extremists. And international security will be strengthened. Most importantly, these profound benefits will be achieved by communities creating prosperity through a pluralist democratic process. This transforms economic and political landscapes and can bring peace and prosperity to millions of people. The U.S. must make funding of this approach to the development of Islamic countries commensurate with the benefits it will bring and the costs of inaction. In this way, a new era of Western-Islamic relations will be created.

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