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MEET A 2015ER: YOSSEF BEN-MEIR

By: Mythili Sampathkumar on February 18, 2015

Ed note. This is the second installment of our new “Meet a 2015er” series that profiles the women and men who are helping to shape the Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change negotiations as they take form later this year.

Today, we get a perspective from civil society. Yossef Ben-Meir is the cofounder and President of the Morocco-based High Atlas Foundation.

What is High Atlas Foundation?

The High Atlas Foundation was formed by former Peace Corps Volunteers in 2000. We help implement the projects communities prioritize. So as we work in rural Morocco most of our projects are in agriculture, water efficiency, clean drinking water, building schools, providing water and trees for schools, there is a range of projects that communities identify as important to them and we assist in implementing them.

We're doing the 'on the ground,' real world version of what is being discussed in these SDG negotiations.



How does that translate to the UN negotiating room where practical action isn't always discussed?

In 2011, the High Atlas Foundation was granted consultative status in the ECOSOC. We feel that our experience in Morocco is transferable to other places. The practical lessons that we learn are relevant...particularly in the final leg of the SDG discussions.

[Our job in the negotiations is] really emphasizing: how do we make [the SDGs] real and apply it to people's lives? When we set these goals...how do you actually apply that? We see ourselves as a bridge between micro and macro and try to make practical these very lofty, though important [high level policies].

We try to participate in as many meetings as possible. More so, if you look at all the sector areas that are emphasized in SDGs, we have position papers in most of them. We are constantly generating material.

Why cover multiple SDGs if your project work is usually in the climate area?

How do we have our cake and eat it too? How do we promote the environment and development all at once? The issue of climate change resonates in the other 16 goals as well. We can't separate climate change from matters of agriculture, water, energy, etc.

For us, we have to describe our work to multiple perspectives. The first funding we got in 2003 was because the tree planting we were doing promoted public diplomacy. When you plan projects that communities identify with, you generate trust. And it was that, that made the U.S. Embassy fund the High Atlas Foundation in part. Climate change has to have that gamut. It has to have that form of environmental benefit for sure, but it also has to bend toward livelihood, lend toward things that enhance our lives.

Let's take out the jargon of 'community involvement' and 'decentralization.' What does that really mean



for sustainable development?

It's in [Morocco's] national scheme...participation is required and it defines sustainable development in a way that we do, and much of the world now does...composed of not just environmental factors, but economic, political, cultural, historical, financial, technical. In order to have all of that, you require participation.

USAID, UNDP, and World Bank all have evaluations that say that participation is even more important than finance for sustainable development.

So let's get back to the negotiating table at the UN. Why have 17 different goals that aren't completely separate? It sounds a bit confusing.

Exactly! Does it have to be 17 SDGs? Or can we find by way of integration a way to find how they are inseparable and [can we cut it down] to ten or 12? I think that may be helpful because first of all it's more realistic when you're presenting things as an integrated whole. Also, it's probably more manageable for nations and organizations to consider ten rather than 17.

There are just too many goals. When you read each one individually they all sound good and extremely important! I wouldn't want to be the one to have to eliminate any of those.

There [has to be] a way to make them...more digestible. To a global audience of nations in different situations, it just seems a little unwieldy. When you have so many...you can't see the interconnection between all of them.

It's probably unlikely that any change like this will happen before September, unfortunately. It is the UN. Given that, what are your hopes for the rest of 2015?

There's a practical hope, then there's your heart's hope.

From our perspective, when you're riveted on community control and determination of their own development path – the SDGs would [ideally] be composed of the aggregate of all community-identified projects in the world. Then they you would classify then and there you would have your direction. But [of course] that's a lot of data collection even on the national level, which a lot of countries haven't done – especially in terms of even having communities identify their own needs. Then conveying that to the UN...well, that's our heart's hope.

That SDGs of the future are composed of an amalgamation of all the inputs of communities of the world – shouldn't that be what SDGs are?

Do you think the UN will ever do that?

I look forward to seeing how the next round of SDGs in 2030 looks. I think we're going to learn a lot in 15 years. In the end, the UN is going to have to go down more and more and more to where the people are.

No one wants elusive goals! In the end though, we're going to end up [at that point]. There's 70 years of experience in international development that says we will.

It hasn't worked! Look at the Millenium Goals, have they worked? No.

So, by 2030 we should have this poverty reduction thing figured out?

Eventually the UN is going to have to face that bullet. You're advocating sustainable development without advocating internal structural reform that's required for sustainable development to occur.

The UN is in a very delicate position because they can't interfere in the internal affairs of any one country. So, for them to come out and say 'you have to transfer [development] power to the people' or 'you have to decentralize planning and...enhance sub-national levels' – that's a little much for the UN to advocate.

Yet, they're advocating the SDGs. There's not a person in the world – and I can literally show you hundreds of pages of text – that say you can't have participation without decentralization.

What's the lasting message to the UN about sustainable development then?

Be a little more brave in telling countries how to make development sustainable.

Discussion