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New Vistas For Students: Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

By Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir, Marrakesh

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HAF President, Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir (left) and USMBA President, Dr. Omar Assobhei (right), visiting the construction site of the university's new hub for innovation

Morocco, in the eyes of many people, is the place where anything is possible. Through a range of policies and actual programs, the Kingdom seeks sustainable human development and decentralization, achieved through participatory democratic methods. Civil organizations are capable of strengthening participatory democracy and creating federations for sustainable development owing to the existence of Moroccan frameworks that encourage this process.

To achieve scale, the model of the High Atlas Foundation (HAF) - a profit / non-profit hybrid - is to invest strategically in training, seeds and infrastructure, thus enabling local cooperatives engaged in organic agriculture to generate further revenue from this and carbon offsets to finance their own human development projects.

Enabling students since 2008

While other vital factors include finance and effective facilitation of participatory meetings, university students constitute a particular group within society that can help catalyze community action and facilitate the planning of their own sustainable projects. They are in a perfect

position to gain capacities, perform a management functions within development projects, create jobs and empower themselves and others.

Since 2008, HAF has been managing experiential training programs at Moroccan universities to provide students with that life-changing opportunity. Thanks to the National Endowment for Democracy and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, the HAF training Center in Mohammedia with the Faculty of Law, Economics, and Social Science helped create a successful basis for expansion. Programs for students are currently scheduled to take place at locations across the Kingdom including SUP MTI in Beni Mellal and the Center for Human and Social Studies and Research in Oujda.

As part of this mission, in October I experienced a day I'll always remember, visiting Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (USMBA), in Fez. I greatly enjoyed speaking with the inspiring people who study and work there and am scheduled to return on November 22nd to talk with students about creating development initiatives in Morocco.

The university has 100,000 students, about three percent of whom are international. Its president, Professor Omar Assobhei, and his team are at the helm of a community determined to advance sustainable human development activity. Mostafa Mouslih is president of Volunteer Experts for Development, a non-profit organization that helps build the University's programs promoting sustainability. USMBA incubates start-ups and, allied to this, possesses a state-of-the-art, well-utilized research medical lab for genetic analysis.

A year ago this month HAF and the university entered into partnership to create the Center for Sustainable Development and Innovation. Its purpose is to promote student and community engagement, acting as a Moroccan and international hub for participatory action and analysis, community consensus, implementation and evaluation.

The circumstances in which the partnership agreement was signed with presidents Assobhei and Mouslih were as memorable as my visit that just took place. We set aside a moment during a reception held at the residence of the United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco, Dwight Bush Sr., in the presence of Mr. André Azoulay, advisor to the King of Morocco. The event itself celebrated House of Life - an interfaith tree nursery and integrated agricultural project of HAF (as well as a commitment-to-action of the Clinton Global Initiative). Launching an endeavor - on this occasion with USMBA - amidst a of moment unity and hope in another context hopefully set things on the best possible footing and serve as a point to consider when planning future significant organizational events

An ongoing success story

During our first year partnering with USMBA, HAF's Mouhssine Tadlaoui-Cherki led a very well-received training program with 66 students (28 women and 38 men) in identifying and organizing for community priority projects. We assisted workshops for critical analysis of the challenges the students faced in their lives, leading to the creation of a fully-sketched proposed program of community development, including service learning and mentorship for vulnerable youth.

This November HAF's Fatima Zahra Laaribi is scheduled to facilitate a four-day empowerment workshop for women of the university utilizing the Imagine approach developed by the Empowerment Institute . The methodology teaches individuals and groups how to transform their limiting beliefs and behavior patterns that are holding them back from their potential in a range of areas - physical, material and spiritual. It helps them direct their creative energies toward achieving what they really want in their own life, working on the premise that it takes courage to dream and knowledge to bring those dreams to fruition.

HAF and its community nursery partners have more than 500,000 young trees available for planting this season!

At COP 22 on November 17th, HAF is holding a Carbon Auction that will expand the support for trees we can plant and monitor with school communities.

At noon on January 16th, 2017, HAF and partners throughout the country are holding public tree-planting events to which all are invited. On this day we plan to share 5,000 trees and interactive environmental activities with schoolchildren partnering with the Education Delegation in Ifrane province, where I visited just before coming to Fez. In Ifrane, HAF is also fully dedicated to the success of a community tree nursery planted on land contributed by Al Akhawayn University. With USMBA, our goal is to plant 10,000 trees, many of them with children on January 16th.

Morocco's human development model, driven by participation, needs to succeed for itself, and in addition inspire the MENA region and world community. It stands to reason, then, that it is vital to create and fund university programs which build the needed capabilities of students and the public for local planning and management of development. Such programs harness empowerment as profoundly for the students as they do for the communities with whom they learn, research and act to create change. I am reminded from my visits that there is nothing like being present with partners, focusing with them to plan steps to realize their dreams of sustainable development, which are fully achievable.

HAF offers fantastic volunteer opportunities in Fez, Oujda, Mohammedia, and Beni Mellal. Could you teach matters of sustainable development in classes at the universities of English as a second language, and at the same time coordinate HAF programs? Professional fulfillment awaits!

Please feel free to contact me: yossef@highatlasfoundation.org

Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir, a sociologist, is president of the High Atlas Foundation, a Moroccan-U.S. nonprofit organization dedicated to participatory development in Morocco.

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62

4

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