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Reforming Morocco from the Ground Up

By **Jason Ben-Meir** | Monday, January 16, 2006

Morocco, perhaps more than any other country in the Middle East, knows that violence and terror will end only when the conditions fueling them are resolved. As Jason Ben-Meir explains, the country's National Initiative for Human Development is a big step in this direction and could mark the beginning of a region-wide movement.

In May 2005, Morocco launched its National Initiative for Human Development as part of a broader plan of social reforms that have taken place since King Mohammed VI's ascendancy to the throne in 1999.

This kind of development is federalist democracy in action. Local people making fundamental decisions and mobilizing for the development of their communities is the hallmark of federalism.

The Initiative was in part founded on the recognition that conditions of poverty allow extremism to exist.

It also recognizes that free trade — which Morocco has with the United States, Turkey and others — can seriously challenge traditional income sources and families if new opportunities are not created.

This problem was particularly evident in rural Mexico after the passage of NAFTA. The region has seen a sharp decline in employment, a fall in prices for farm products, lower land prices, urban migration, a rise in income inequality and an increased agricultural trade deficit.

The basic outline

The Moroccan initiative initially targets five million people (the majority in rural areas) and has a budget of \$1.1 billion through 2010 (20% of which is contributed from abroad).

It is dedicated to building Morocco's infrastructure (potable water, electricity and roads), creating employment and income-generating activities and providing social services for people in the most need (at-risk youth and women, the homeless and the elderly).

Help from inside and out

The international community has a lot to gain, since the project can serve as a model for other nations in the region. Its success, however, depends on how it is implemented and the extent to which the Moroccan people feel ownership of the development projects that are established.

To achieve its stated goals, the Initiative should create action plans based on local priorities and build the necessary partnerships to implement and manage projects.

Rural villages across Morocco regularly identify potable water, irrigation, school construction, women's cooperatives and fruit and forestry tree planting among their top development priorities.

More than any other project, potable water decreases infant mortality and illness among the population. Modern irrigation maximizes the utility of water supplies and creates the opportunity for schools, clinics, women's coops and other service centers to be built by increasing the land that has access to water.

Important projects

Fruit trees diversify household incomes and in doing so, they can help prevent the rural dislocation caused by free trade.

Training people in facilitating community meetings throughout the project area will give the Initiative the reach it needs to engage people in the development process from village to village and neighborhood to neighborhood.

Facilitating these efforts

The facilitators are particularly important in the beginning stages of the process. They help to organize meetings, manage conflicts and develop consensus. Schoolteachers, government technicians (such as in health and agriculture), politicians, non-government personnel, community members and others can be effective facilitators.

The Initiative is already dedicated to building local centers for vulnerable groups, which will help them attain self-reliance through skill building.

One example of where this is already taking place in Morocco is the national park's divisions, some of which have facilitators on their staffs. These facilitators assist the members of rural villages that neighbor protected nature areas with creating strategic plans for the development of their communities.

The projects that are designed involve agreements between the villages and the park managers. Often, these initiatives take the form of new income generating activities as desired by the local people (such as fruit tree planting) in exchange for the villagers' accommodation of nature protection measures, such as not allowing grazing animals to feed in designated areas within the park.

The new income reduces communities' dependence on the natural resources of the protected areas and in turn promotes conservation. In this way, economic development in itself can further environmental goals. The facilitators play a critical role by helping to bring all parties together and negotiate win-win scenarios.

Power to the people

This kind of development is federalist democracy in action. Local people making fundamental decisions and mobilizing for the development of their communities is the hallmark of federalism. What is more, broad participation — which is extremely difficult to achieve without effective facilitation — is a basic quality of a vibrant democracy.

The public-private partnerships that are formed are shown to have sensitized government officials to the needs and interests of local people. The partnerships also encourage greater accountability and transparency, which help to prevent corruption.

The importance of teachers

If Morocco's National Initiative makes training in facilitation a major vehicle through which communities across the nation are brought into the development process, the socio-economic and political consequences of this 'bottom-up' approach will be profound. Morocco will then be a unique example in the world of a country that has implemented this approach on a national scale.

Rural schoolteachers are an obvious group to start with, because they are dispersed throughout the country. They are typically very recent university graduates who were raised in cities.

Training rural teachers in facilitation presents an important opportunity that is well recognized by the Minister of Social Development, Family and Solidarity, Abderrahim Harouchi, who is a primary coordinator of the Initiative. At his request, a training design is currently being developed for the initial training of 100 teachers.

Training in facilitation is most effective when it is done in real situations where trainees can work closely with communities. The communities that participate in the training also greatly benefit from the experience, which is not the case when training is done off-site.

Using what works

Trainees should apply activities such as community mapping, pairwise ranking and other programs that have worked well with some communities in Morocco and around the world. Community mapping has the participants create a map of their community that shows where various resources, activities and opportunities are located.

This helps to build a common understanding of the boundaries and characteristics of the community, and it has shown to be an effective initial activity for members to begin discussing the changes they would like to see in their lives.

Help centers

The success of Morocco's development plan will depend on how it is implemented and the extent to which the Moroccan people feel ownership of the projects that are established.

Pairwise ranking needs assessment is a technique that helps the participants identify principle development opportunities based on their preferences and assists them toward achieving consensus. Developing new community planning activities in Morocco should also be encouraged.

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The Initiative is already dedicated to building local centers for vulnerable groups, which help them attain self-reliance through skill building. In this framework, community development planning and training centers should be built in targeted areas.

These centers are managed by community members and assist local people in designing and implementing projects.

These centers also provide the transfer of skills in modern agriculture, health, handy crafts, management and other areas identified by the local population. Centers are a local resource that can play a significant role in enabling the Initiative to succeed as a long-term project and help achieve the ambitious sustainable

development goals.

What's at stake

Morocco should be recognized for its bold Initiative. Clearly, the commitment of the King of Morocco and the government to the program's success is very serious and strong. Though the question remains: Will they do what it takes to truly mobilize local communities across the entire nation and in so doing transform their society from the bottom up?

The stakes are high for the country, and the international community should do all it can to support Morocco's effort to confront realities and be a critical example for the region and the world.



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Jason Ben-Meir is pursuing a Doctorate in Sociology at the University of New Mexico. He is President of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization that helps to establish community projects in Morocco that local people design and manage. Mr. Ben-Meir is also a fellow at the American Institute of Maghrib Studies.

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Mr. Ben-Meir is also a founding member of the Diversity Institute, a nonprofit that promotes ethnic reconciliation and community development in the United States.

Jason Ben-Meir's publications mostly focus on strategies for implementing community development in the Islamic world and how that can enhance relations with the West.

He holds a Masters degree (1997) in International Development and Social Change from Clark University, Massachusetts, and a Bachelors degree (1991) in Economics from New York University. He lives in New York City.

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