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## Development Visions From The Impoverished

By Yossef Ben-Meir, Dr. (/author/YossefBenMeir)

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The world's most extreme poor are located primarily in rural places. Clearly, people's proximity (or lack of) to city centers of decision-making, power and relative affluence is a determining factor in their life experience, alongside other conditions that lead to the systemic poverty experienced by rural families.

Addressing rural impoverishment involves implementing projects relating to water provision, agriculture, building schools and designing curriculum content as well as gender issues and other matters of historic justice. For development in these areas to be sustainable we know that the participation of the ultimate beneficiaries in project design and management is the critical determining factor alongside finance.

In order to catalyze such participation we also know – through decades of international development successes and failures – that providing facilitators of community dialogue and consensus-building is essential. After all, local community members – young and old, women and men, the haves and the have-nots – generally do not come together spontaneously and in an inclusive way to identify common goals.

Ministries responsible for promoting human development and international agencies that share that mission frequently find it difficult to serve the most remote communities since, in order to achieve popular participation and therefore sustainability, close and constant proximity to the people is required.

Eradicating extreme poverty therefore necessitates an extreme, three-point shift in the approach taken to meet human needs.

First, concerned national and international agencies must base their plans on community-determined project priorities. In order to ensure that these priorities are a genuine reflection of the people's will, agency representatives must live and work with - and listen to - communities.

Second, donors, in order to meet communities' self-described needs, should have funding arrangements that are flexible with regard to project type (agricultural, health, educational, etc). In other words in order to sustainably alleviate poverty, it is the charge of donors to adapt to the goals of beneficiaries, rather than vice versa.

Finally, participatory methods for community planning need to be expanded, adapted to local circumstances and recreated in new social contexts so that their dissemination and applicability may be significantly enhanced.

Practitioners of participatory approaches to development usually rely on a specific family of methods, typically including a dozen or so activities that groups utilize to effectively evaluate their development-related challenges and opportunities. However, there are hundreds of families of such methods applicable to popular participation and planning for social change.

Agencies dedicated to sustainable development must be made aware of the full extent and scope of these tools before employing, testing and improving upon them together with local people. Eventually, globally accessible 'warehouses' of appropriate methodology will be available to assist communities as they embark upon their sustainable development course.

When these three factors have been addressed, eradicating extreme poverty becomes not a dream or a utopian condition removed from the present reality, but an historic human calling answered by policies, programs and investment centered on the beneficiaries themselves.

Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is the president of the High Atlas Foundation, a U.S.-Moroccan non-government organization dedicated to sustainable development.

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