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FIGS MAY PROVIDE SECURITY FOR RURAL MOROCCANS

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SOPHIE WINTER, MOROCCO

By Ida Sophie Winter

Moroccan fig trees are a part of Ahmed Hakam. Until he was nine years old, Hakam never ventured outside of his birth village near the northern city of Ouezzane. He vividly remembers the yearly local fig harvest, when he, his mother, and scores of women and their children from nearby villages would gather to dry figs on palm shrub leaves. While women worked, children were socialized among the fig plantations.

“As children, we spent a lot of time playing, eating, singing in fig trees,” said Hakam.

This experience, he says, greatly affected his life path. As a Ministry of Agriculture and Maritime Fisheries official, he has spent the greater part of his 32-year career rehabilitating and securing value-added processing for Moroccan crops. He places special emphasis on figs due to their rich biological heritage: throughout Morocco and especially in the northern mountains, farmers have been cultivating figs by breeding wild and domestic species for thousands of years, a practice that has allowed myriad types to evolve and thrive throughout the country.

According to Yossef Ben-Meir, president of the Moroccan-American nonprofit High Atlas Foundation, however, this biodiversity is threatened by lack of investment in community-managed tree nurseries, inefficient water use, and little opportunity to increase the product’s value through processing. The Moroccan government indicates that farmers, unable to utilize value-added opportunities for figs, are relegating them to mountain slopes and other areas difficult to reach for transportation. More accessible land, meanwhile, is used for resource-intensive crops like wheat, apples, and pears. In some areas of Morocco, over 50 percent of fig cultivars have therefore disappeared, and figs decay, unharvested, on the tree branch. Ancient fig cultivars are dying out.

This decline in production, however, has led to increased domestic demand. Fresh fig prices, says Hakam, are now higher than those per kilo for bananas and apples. Demand is certainly high internationally, representing significant opportunity for Moroccan farmers and investors. In 2014, global fig demand reached $448 million and grew 8 percent from 2007 to 2014, according to marketing firm Index Box. To access this market, Ben-Meir says that farmers must first access the financial and knowledge-based resources to increase production and ensure consistent quality.

The Moroccan government has decided to invest in fig production in partnership with the High Atlas Foundation, which is already active in organic almond and walnut production. Together, these institutions plan to build a nursery near Ouezzane, due to the region's established tradition of fig production and the threats regional fig plantations face from the neglect that has already extinguished indigenous plum varieties.

The partnership will support 10 varieties of threatened local figs and distribute saplings for free to farmers. The program will train farmers in organic-certified production; help them pursue opportunities to increase product value, like drying and processing into jam; and create a farmer's co-op to share knowledge and explore additional value-added opportunities. The partnership will also create a scientific teaching garden featuring all regional fig varieties. This pilot program aims to benefit 35,000 rural Moroccans by extending fig crops by 1,000 hectares. The project will contribute to the government's goal of increasing national fig production by 126 percent within the next five years.

Knowledge is acutely needed at a fig plantation near Ouezzane, where farmers lose out on economic opportunities due to lack of infrastructure and knowledge. While dried figs sell for the equivalent $1.80 to $2 per kilogram locally, selling fresh figs at only $0.80 to $1 represents a roughly 50 percent loss. Farmers at this plantation dry their second crop, making

it more valuable, but must sell their early-summer crop fresh, as its high water content prevents effective traditional sun-drying.

Due to a lack of cold storage, farmers must harvest early in the morning and arrange transportation for figs to local souks by the afternoon to generate the most profit from this delicate crop. With drying machines and cold storage, farmers could ensure consistent quality for dry figs and a longer life for fresh figs, increasing the chances of export to higher-value markets for both products.

At the farmers' plantation, Hakam points to a large tree surrounded by many offshoots. Farmers tell him that this tree produces 300 kilograms of fruit per year. With some simple pruning, he says, it could yield twice that amount. Farmers in this region, however, have not been educated in these techniques.

When asked what the farming community would do with extra revenue from increased structural support and efficiency, farmer Fatima Khaima, who left school at age 15, emphasizes children's education. There is a well-attended primary school a kilometer-and-a-half away, she says. Past age 12, however, roughly 30 percent of children drop out because they do not have the money for $1.20 worth of travel and food at the secondary school 9 kilometers away.

Another barrier to children's education, says Khaima, is road quality. The fig plantation is surrounded by steep dirt roads that are washed away in the winter. If profits from figs increased, the community could invest in better roads and ensure that children could consistently attend school despite weather conditions.

"[Increased revenue from figs] will help us for our future," Khaima said. One person already benefiting from fig crops is Jamal Belkadi, a farmer in the nearby village of Asjen. Belkadi began his fig plantation in 2000 with

two trees, and through traditional grafting of tree branches grew his crop to 170. Starting "without a single dirham a day," he now makes a $4,000 profit every year to support his wife and two young daughters.

Belkadi says these fig trees mean the world to him. They are also significant for his community, where he creates seasonal agricultural jobs and to which he has allocated three trees' worth of fruit annually. "I feel happy," said Belkadi. "My love are these trees. I work with them. I sweat over them… People come and eat, and say, 'God bless your parents.' I'm better with God."

By investing in fig farming communities, the Ministry of Agriculture and High Atlas Foundation can facilitate knowledge sharing between farmers like Khaima and Belkadi. By learning together and ultimately increasing the efficiency of farming, these communities can use their increased wealth to invest in important infrastructure like roads and other community-determined projects. Ultimately, these farmers can ensure that their children receive a full education.

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