

A Radical Rethink: Aligning People's and Donors' Priorities

New York - *With the enormous diversity of social contexts where development interventions take place, one might imagine it would be extremely difficult to identify a single rule of thumb that enables the best possibility for project success, or sustainability.* However, global experiences since the aftermath of WWII and the implementation of the Marshall Plan do in fact point to an identifiable quality – as essential as finance – that must be present in order for development initiatives to endure. I refer to the participation of the intended beneficiaries in all aspects and phases of the project cycle, from inception to evaluation, to the point where it is in fact they, rather than any outside agencies, who dictate the path of a project. Concomitant with this, sustainable development across nations and the globe can only be realized where donors align their priorities squarely with the self-determined priorities of the people. **Bridging the gap - theory and practice** The path to the acceptance of the participatory approach to development was forged, through trial and error, over several decades until the 1990s, when its global recognition by development practitioners became well-established. Possessing this theoretical knowledge is, however, unfortunately not the same as achieving broad participation of local people in the design and management of projects that are intended to benefit them. Participation requires facilitation, meaning that, in order for inclusive local development planning to occur, a third party coordinator is necessary – one who applies interactive activities that enable participants to assess their needs and prioritize the changes they seek. Facilitators therefore need to work and live among

the people, transferring the essential skills so that communities themselves can maintain the project development momentum. Unfortunately, the vast majority of development agencies do not have the human resources and the absolute commitment needed in order to achieve this vital, constant proximity to needy communities, who are often to be found in the most remote locations. Genuine participation on the ground does not unfold without at least initial support. Too often there remains a tragic gap between what donors to development are willing to fund and the projects that communities identify as most important to them. This gap accounts for much project failure and can be bridged by donors supporting the application of proven participatory planning methods as well as being prepared to embrace the possibility of a range of project types (agricultural, health, education) emerging from the local dialogue process. **Case studies** Examples of successes – and of the opposite – can be found at the national and international level. In the High Atlas mountain region of Morocco, the typical donor solution is tourist-related, based on the thousands of hikers and general visitors each year who seek to behold the most awesome peaks in North Africa. Yet, after hundreds of meetings among communities of the region, not a single one identified tourism as a priority project area. This is because tourism typically benefits a few households out of many, the pattern being to stop in one village along a line of ten that may exist in a valley and, in that single location, enjoying a meal or an overnight stay. On the other hand, all communities identify clean drinking water, irrigation and women and youth enterprises as top priorities because these will benefit every household in a given village and every village in the valley. For a short period during the 1990s there existed opportunities for Israeli-Moroccan development collaboration. What a tragedy it was that the sole project that both included government-to-government cooperation and met local villagers' self-described needs, namely an irrigation project including the installation of

pressure-drip systems, was denied funding by USAID's Middle East Regional Cooperation program, since it did not involve joint technological development. Where there is an opportunity for Israeli-Palestinian shared effort to implement local projects of whatever type, that are determined by local Palestinians, that opportunity should not pass because it may not fit within the strict donor guidelines of what they think local people might need. At a time now of Shi'ite and Sunni major escalation of distrust and violence, the international community should fund any and every initiative that involves their joint collaboration in order to achieve the development goals of the people. Particularly in the context of the Arab Spring, the affirmation that people experience as the democratic planning of local development progresses, would have a stabilizing effect, both in political and social terms. In Ferguson, Missouri, and other U.S. counties with especially divided social groups, local people would do well to create businesses and human service initiatives that cross ethnic and faith-based communities, whose scope the beneficiaries themselves should determine. In this case contributing donors would be funding the basis for empowerment, peace and prosperity, all at once. The radical conclusion, therefore, is that a partial 'rewriting of the rules' is necessary to rectify the disconnect that can exist between donor requirements and the popular will. At times this would send strong messages that cross political divisions while, fundamentally, ensuring project success and genuine social justice.



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Possessing this theoretical knowledge is, however, unfortunately not the same as achieving broad participation of local people in the design and management of projects that are intended to benefit them.

Participation requires facilitation, meaning that, in order for inclusive local development planning to occur, a third party coordinator is necessary – one who applies interactive activities that enable participants to assess their needs and prioritize the changes they seek.

Facilitators therefore need to work and live among the people, transferring the

essential skills so that communities themselves can maintain the project development momentum. Unfortunately, the vast majority of development agencies do not have the human resources and the absolute commitment needed in order to achieve this vital, constant proximity to needy communities, who are often to be found in the most remote locations.

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Case studies

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Morocco World News' editorial policy.

