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MOROCCAN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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In recent years, Morocco has put in place the right frameworks for mobilizing rural communities to advance the nation's sustainable development goals, yet it falls woefully short when it comes to implementation. These frameworks – including decentralization (<http://www.pncl.gov.ma/fr/Decentralisation/Pages/Processus-de-d%C3%A9centralisation.aspx>), women's (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/vitalstatkb/Attachment808.aspx?AttachmentType=1>) and youth (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/05/10/morocco-invests-in-its-young-people>) empowerment, value chain agriculture

(<https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2132676/moroccos-king-launches-green-generation-2020-2030>), and participatory planning (<http://www.sgg.gov.ma/CodesTextesLois/Loipontantchartecommunale.aspx>) – are embodied in national charters, policies, and programs that have as a key purpose to promote locally inclusive development and opportunities.

The problem is that Morocco's frameworks for national development through people's participation are not being orchestrated so as to be mutually reinforcing to enable them to adequately achieve their individual purposes. As will be explained, and as recently acknowledged (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2018/09/253812/king-mohammed-vi-human-development-program-indh/>) by the Moroccan government, integrating these programs would enable their synergy to accelerate the growth and success of development initiatives. In response to the public calls (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2018/02/241511/king-mohammed-vi-development-model/>) by King Mohammed VI that the nation reconsider its development model, this essay takes the position and explains with case evidence that it is the implementation process of the nation's development model that requires the major reevaluation and overhaul, not the guiding principles or vision of the model itself.

The promise and peril of Moroccan agriculture

Over my 26 years of rural development work in Morocco, I have analyzed how these frameworks can work together and complement each other. Since 2000, I have led the High Atlas Foundation (<https://highatlasfoundation.org/>), a Moroccan-U.S. civil organization that assists local communities throughout Morocco in their identification and management of priority development projects—in agriculture, education, health, and women's and youth empowerment. The community data-gathering, assessments, consensus-building, and overall project experiences engaging with the ministries and administrative tiers have afforded me a perspective on how Morocco's frameworks for sustainable and shared growth require their implementation to be in tandem in order for the goals of any one of them to be well achieved.

Morocco is a nation of immense promise (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/02/19/morocco-new-program-of-support-focused-on-investing-in-people-and-economic-transformation>) in terms of its human development potential. The country's naturally bountiful landscape, if combined with dynamic social development frameworks, could transform Morocco into a haven of community-managed projects. Such prosperity could serve as a beacon for change in Africa and the Islamic world. However, if Morocco continues to fall short of development goals for rural and marginalized groups, other nations in the region may feel deterred from committing themselves as Morocco has done to charters of decentralization (<http://www.pncl.gov.ma/fr/Decentralisation/Pages/Processus-de-d%C3%A9centralisation.aspx>), women's freedoms (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/vitalstatkb/Attachment808.aspx?AttachmentType=1>), and participatory community action (<http://www.maroc.ma/en/content/indh>).

Rural communities have great agricultural and human development possibilities (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/02/19/morocco-new-program-of-support-focused-on-investing-in-people-and-economic-transformation>) regarding the range of potential organic and endemic food product, niche artisanal crafts, and available markets. Yet, recent years have witnessed a 15 percent rise in rural households (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/morocco/publication/poverty-in-morocco-challenges-and-opportunities>) considering themselves poor. 75 percent of all impoverished Moroccan people reside in rural places (<https://borgenproject.org/morocco-poverty-rate/>) and experience close to five times the national poverty rate (<https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/poverty-morocco-world-news-sustainable-development-34540/>). These farmers likely lack access to basic essential human development projects.

Morocco's agricultural development programs (<http://www.agriculture.gov.ma/pages/la-strategie>) to promote product cultivation, processing, and commercializing are not making a sufficient difference (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/agriculture-and-rural-development-for-inclusive-growth-and-food-security-in-morocco/>) for the majority of families who farm five hectares or less of land and who experience intractable poverty. Despite immense local and national potential, rural poverty (<https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-people-of-moroccos-high-atlas-civil-societys-role-in-achieving-the-sustainable-development-goals-sdg/5667928>) is the "Achilles' heel" of Morocco's stability and prosperity.

Farming families are compelled by the market and population to transition away from growing the traditional staples of barley and corn. According to the Ministry of Agriculture (<http://www.agriculture.gov.ma/en/pages/strategy>), these staples are grown on 75 percent of agricultural land, yet account for only 10-15 percent of agricultural revenue. Farmers are transitioning to cash-crops, commonly fruit trees and plants, to generate greater income. However, the high demand for young trees has made them too expensive for many families and nurseries and the skills to maintain them are not sufficiently dispersed. Also, Morocco should consider the experience of Ivory Coast (<https://infomineo.com/the-dangers-of-a-cash-crop-first-policy-the-case-of-ivory-coast/>) before promoting cash-crop farming too aggressively.

Morocco needs public investment in low-income agriculture

The Moroccan government should invest in low-income farming and fund nurseries on public land lent to community associations to reduce risk and cost to farmers, similar to what the Moroccan High Commission of Waters and Forests (<https://highatlasfoundation.org/caring-for-life-in-tadmamt/>), public schools (<https://lematin.ma/journal/2016/convention-de-partenariat-a-ifrane/241498.html>), universities (<https://highatlasfoundation.org/promoting-civil-society-university-engagement-in-fez/>), the Moroccan Jewish Community (<https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL1508/S00032/lending-land-to-enhance-life.htm?from-mobile=bottom-link-01>), and others have done with the High Atlas Foundation (HAF). Our program works to strengthen cooperative capacity-building in management and technical areas, organic, food safety, and other certifications, and revolving lines of credit in order for cooperatives to acquire certified product for its processing and sale. The results of these combined actions will be a surge in cultivation and market-ready product, along with improved local organization, reinvestment in human development, and decentralized partnerships that conduct decision-making considerate of such multiple factors.

Enormous value is lost by family farmers due to tree and seed dependency (http://navdanya.org/attachments/Seed%20Freedom_Revised_8-10-2012.pdf), irrigation inefficiency (<http://www.agriculture.gov.ma/en/pages/strategy>), ineffectual cooperatives, and selling through traditional local market channels. The vast majority of farming families are without the production capacity, partnerships, and means to add value and reach a consistent standard and quality necessary to enter more rewarding markets. These stifling barriers keep the average household income as low as one fifth what it could be if a viable system were in place, based on my personal estimate. Thus, rural farmers' savings, income, and revenue for reinvestment are unnecessarily low, offering significant potential for growth.

Ensuring and expanding rural irrigation infrastructure must be the top priority. Moroccan farmers are deeply frustrated with the anemic progress made in implementing rural development projects. Farming communities know and consistently prioritize exactly the needed irrigation infrastructure to uplift all village households, yet even when the local beneficiaries would gladly contribute their in-kind labor, there has been no construction. Project priority solutions in irrigation – water canals, basins, towers, pipes, and pumps – can conserve water by 50 percent or more (<http://www.fao.org/3/S8684E/s8684e02.htm>). Such projects are prohibitively expensive, especially in mountain areas, yet hardly any other project will more greatly improve agricultural production, food security, and income.

For example, the material cost to implement basic irrigation needs (a basin, canal and pipes) in the village of Tassa Ouirgane in the High Atlas is \$35,000 – more than half the entire village's annual income. Yet, the Tass-Ouirgane people perpetuate their poverty by not implementing their viable irrigation projects in conjunction with fruit tree planting.

The obvious counterargument to the irrigation recommendation is that there are already similar government subsidy programs (<http://www.agriculture.gov.ma/pages/la-strategie>) (pressure drip systems, for example). However, those programs need to be brought to the farmers where they are, with partnerships that aid their strategic planning and experiential learning.

Rural development conditions are very problematic; there are the near complete losses of local fruit tree varieties of fig, apple, pear, grape, clementine, carob, date, and others that are endemic in the north, and other varieties elsewhere in Morocco. They offer a genetic resource (<https://intpolicydigest.org/2018/05/21/conserving-traditional-crop-diversity-and-wild-medicinal-plants-in-morocco/>) for small farmers, enhancing food security in the face of water scarcity and climate change. However, agrobiodiversity remains seriously undermined because of a few high-yielding varieties that cause genetic erosion.

Agriculture under Morocco's framework for development

The Municipal Charter (<http://www.sgg.gov.ma/CodesTextesLois/Loiimportantchartecommunale.aspx>), forming community development plans driven by the intended beneficiaries, women and men of all ages, is key for sustainable agricultural project identification and implementation. The Charter requires locally elected representatives to create one-, three-, and five-year development plans derived from people's participation in the determination of local projects. This could be a major chance for sustainable development to take hold due to the fact that people's participation and financing are the key factors of project sustainability. In this context, project development facilitation by local officials, civil society members, teachers, among others, is helpful and needed; establishing centers of participatory planning to assist with dialogue, meeting space, and coordination is vital.

The Moroccan frameworks for development enumerate what is needed to catalyze sustainable development of marginalized areas and groups, and a few instructive cases have brought ideas to full implementation with replicable and enduring results. These successful cases encourage decentralized development management in order to enable local communities to allocate resources to the best projects. They target depressed areas, women, and youth (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/05/10/morocco-invests-in-its-young-people>) in recognition of their disadvantaged situations, and their role as key drivers of transformational change.

Taken together, these frameworks provide the needed comprehensive pathways for the people of Morocco to achieve the future they want, providing a course and means to help reach their human development goals. Moroccan agriculture and agroforestry, with its income-generating and environment-enhancing potential, can and should be the engine for self-reliant financing of the people's projects, especially in rural areas that need it the most.

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