

Moroccan Decentralization: Towards Community Development and National Solidarity

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Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir first introduced us to development and decentralization in Morocco in 2018 < <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/a-model-to-implement->

[sustainable-development-in-morocco/>](#). In this new piece, he re-examines and updates Morocco's progress towards sustainable development.

Background on Moroccan Decentralization

Decentralization in the Kingdom of Morocco—aiming to make unprecedented strides for people's development and for an enduring reconciliation of the conflict involving the Western Sahara—grows from successful charters and programs that concentrate on participatory democratic approaches to social actions. Morocco has created for itself guiding pathways toward sustainable development that, if successful, could become a replicable model for other nations' decisions on socio-economic and environmental change.

Morocco's commitments to decentralization through localized development, expansion of women's rights and liberation, cultural plurality, and a number of other participatory democratic guarantees make the stakes extremely high. If its practical vision for change works, the nation will further its goal to mobilize tens of thousands of villages and neighborhoods for critical life enhancements with commitments through sustainable, localized development; but if its implementation fails, then these humanistic and inclusive approaches to social growth may become a historic loss for the Moroccan people and considered less replicable by countries elsewhere.

The recent US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara is an implicit indication that decentralization could provide the long-term basis for national stability and shared growth. The final, autonomous status of the Western Sahara, the Southern Provinces within a sovereign Morocco, can accommodate the interests of self-determination and national unity, especially when sealed by locally and regionally conceived and life-enhancing development.

For Morocco to make important strides toward sustainable development, decentralization is the key framework to which it has constitutionally committed, as well as to other frameworks for local community actions. However, while decentralization is the cornerstone for sustainable growth, as noted by Morocco's Special Commission Report, The New Development Model,^[1] submitted to the government last April, it has not taken hold in meaningful ways. The immense challenge lies in that decentralization's vibrant manifestation is dependent upon the effectiveness

of Morocco's other national development initiatives and policies that will be discussed.

Morocco's New Development Model is a guide toward sustainable and shared prosperity and, as stated in the Report, is to be propelled by the nation's historically multifaceted identity. The solidarity of the diversity of people not only ought to carry forward the immense responsibility and opportunity for the growth that they seek, but it is also the defining feature for success and distinction. In a direct sense, the public rediscovering through participatory community dialogue the local and national narratives of their multidimensional Moroccan identity as it relates to religions and ethnicities can lead to their collective planning and action for broad-based development and real transformational possibilities.

Morocco's Decentralization Design

Decentralization arrangements grow as a reflection of identifying and creating projects from the people, and such beneficial systems cannot emerge if people are not given the opportunities to determine, design, and implement their most deeply felt priorities. Thus, Moroccan decentralization will come into fruition only when the Municipal Charter^[2] of the nation is fulfilled. Further, financing to implement development projects is essential to upholding the statutes of the Municipal Charter, which necessitates the linking of those projects to the National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD),^[3] a key mechanism for distributing public funds for local projects.

On a national level, Morocco appears to be guided by two seemingly incongruent frameworks for advancing decentralized management. However, the Moroccan government, through an official of the Ministry of Interior, explains them as two legs of the same body. The first approach, the "Roadmap" fashioned from public statements delivered by King Mohammed VI of Morocco since 2007,^[4] describes a system where local communities identify and pursue priority development projects. These initiatives are supported by subnational intersectoral partnerships along with engaged and contributive national level ministries. As a matter of fact, this framework makes complementary three broad approaches to decentralization, which had been mostly thought of as stand-alone pathways in cases around the world. These structural approaches include (1) community control over their own project planning and management; (2) collaboration among the public and private sectors at the various levels below the national to advance

development; and (3) financial, technical, and advisory resources for growth provided by the central government. Moroccan decentralization of this integrated sort emphasizes the municipality—the administrative tier closest to the people—as the catalyst for community project participation, supported by entities within every sector and tier of society.

Since the formulation of the Decentralization Roadmap,^[5] its enactment has not yet had an appreciable impact on people's lives. This decentralization, which can be historic and trajectory-altering for a country, necessitates facilitation and ongoing local community movements through continuous development project cycles, though challenging to achieve in any nation.

The second national decentralization arrangement, explained in the 2019 Charter, does not mention the municipal level, but rather explains the relationship between the central level at Rabat and the twelve regional capitals, as well as their respective responsibilities. The Roadmap and Charter focus on different administrative levels, and they are intended to be combined to cover the core functions of the whole public management structure. However, the Charter should explicitly state the regional responsibility for ensuring the formation of inter- and intra-tier partnerships that assist local projects and engage communities in creating the change they most need. In the decentralization project, guidance is necessary as to the role and goals of each administrative level.

In Morocco's intended decentralized organization, the provinces—the tier between the region and the municipality and the place where governors sit—are left without explicit guidance. Vibrant provincial administrations are needed because many provinces individually contain dozens of municipalities. A singular decentralization framework is still necessary to designate the critical functions and guiding principles that govern all administrative level, particularly between the subnational tiers. Thus, combining the Roadmap and the Charter into a singular document with more explicit explanation and roles could inform and strengthen Morocco's decentralization system over time.

Decentralization in Morocco - The Current State

Decentralization constitutes a central part of Morocco's sustainable development agenda. With the launch of the NIHD in 2005, the Decentralization Roadmap, the Municipal Charter's participatory development amendments, the ratification of a new Constitution in 2011, and

2019's yet-unratified Decentralization Charter, Morocco has committed to concentrate decision-making at subnational levels on a range of human affairs.

The ratification of the Constitution, which was backed by a public referendum, enshrined the rights of citizens to participate in decision-making and administration. As a result, the twelve regions of the country are gradually becoming more distinct autonomous governing bodies adhering to and fulfilling public law. In 2015, the Constitution was amended to promote the procedures and vibrancy of local democracy through measures such as public referenda on municipal decisions, publicly-shared budgets, ensuring equal access of citizens, and participatory arrangements in open forums.^{[6],[7]}

Morocco has set the stage for community-managed development to be carried forward through subnational partnerships and democratic and decentralization parameters. This approach encourages replication and scale, making the Moroccan experience, policies, and model globally informative.

Morocco's Municipal Charter

Morocco's Municipal Charter requires local representatives to create development plans based on community input through public meetings and forums. It is described as entrusting municipalities with engaging a wide range of key services that require greater capacities to effectively deliver, including the provision of electricity, water and sanitation, roads, urban transport, and solid waste management.^[8]

The Municipal Charter could act as a gateway for development and decentralization to become a reality. However, a constant challenge is that elected municipal council members, who are responsible for facilitating project identification with local residents, are often untrained in applying the participatory activities that generate the needed technical, qualitative, and feasibility-related information. In order to effectively fulfill their responsibilities to the Charter, representatives and community members need to develop practical skills, which can be achieved through applied learning workshops organized by government, civil society, universities, and socially responsible businesses.

The National Initiative for Human Development

The National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD) provides access to public funding for local projects such as infrastructure, capacity-building, and income-generating activities. Each successful community project incorporating multi-sectoral partnerships advances decentralized management arrangements in some measure. Such an administrative system that promotes decentralized development is made operational by agencies of the public and private sectors working together to assist creating local initiatives—along with national-level support that includes a multi-billion-dollar annual budget for NIHD. Morocco’s framework to promote decentralized arrangements is intended to cultivate these public-private collaborations.

The NIHD’s primary role should be to assist with supporting community-determined projects designed consistently with the participatory requirements of the Municipal Charter. Indeed, the NIHD and the Municipal Charter can achieve their individual best satisfaction by working in tandem. The application of development planning assisted by locally elected officials, as called for in the Municipal Charter, is intended to produce new local enterprises designed through community meetings, i.e., the kinds of projects to be targeted for NIHD funding.

The participatory premise is that communities drive the overall development process by being engaged in every step, from evaluating challenges to finding innovative solutions, managing projects, monitoring results, and finally reaping the shared benefits. This approach involves partners from all sectors in ensuring equity for rural and urban disadvantaged groups through financial, technical, and other resources. In this methodology, resulting initiatives directly satisfy communities’ needs and are adapted to social and environmental conditions.

Unfortunately, this is not happening to the extent needed in Morocco. Conversations with local, provincial, and national officials since 2010 have made it clear to the author that the vast majority of them are not trained in facilitating democratic procedures for development planning. The NIHD should invest in experiential training for such action planning with local government and civil society members. Equipping teachers, technicians, and interested citizens with the ability to coordinate participatory dialogue would be a powerful driver of projects.

Additionally, the NIHD will significantly advance growth if it is allowed to fund the range of projects that communities decide are most important. The NIHD criteria regarding preferred project types have often changed while rural community priorities have remained consistent: building water systems, preschools, and agricultural enterprises. Furthermore, according to most current and potential beneficiaries of the NIHD whom met with the author, the requirement that they co-invest thirty percent of the total project costs themselves is a major barrier to people's participation in this program. Therefore, the amount of co-investment should be reduced to no more than ten percent, which still achieves the buy-in incentive. Finally, NIHD proposal submission timelines are not consistent year to year, often with a short window following the public call for proposals. This further disenfranchises people, particularly rural residents, whose literacy and ability to access the intricate application format are often limited. NIHD can expand its level of access by also co-creating proposals with local applicants in the communities where they live.

The Decentralization Roadmap

The Decentralization Roadmap, established by the King of Morocco through public statements, integrates three pillars to empower regions and municipalities: devolution, de-concentration, and delegation. The aim of ongoing national-level engagement along with subnational partnerships for implementing projects rallies the different administrative tiers to achieve development projects identified at the community level.

Moroccan decentralized systems become institutionalized when communities analyze their needs, create enterprises based on personal and collective interests, and build partnerships between the public, private, and civil sectors. Thus, the more that local-level participatory projects are brought about by communities utilizing multi-sectoral partnership, the more decentralization takes shape.

Furthermore, the organic evolution of the system continues to expand from the administrative tier closest to the people—in Morocco, the municipality—toward higher tiers—provincial, regional, then national—when community groups federate, motivated by shared interests and goals. There are positive instances of these occurrences in Morocco, but decentralization has yet to be systemically implemented. Building a decentralized system from

the bottom-up takes constant facilitation of inter-sectoral collaboration, including between institutions at different administrative tiers.

Advancing decentralization too quickly, however, without focusing on equitable distribution of benefits has been observed elsewhere to create harmful consequences, such as further entrenching the local social stratification and power structures. To avoid this outcome, the Municipal Charter and NIHD should be genuinely implemented, leading to inclusive participatory development movements, whereby the construction of decentralized management is alternatively propelled by group decision making. Molding this kind of system requires greater support and practical experiences for communities and associations to guide projects that incorporate increasing personal and collective empowerment, including economic independence.

Making Agriculture the Flagship Sector for the New Model

The productive translation of the premises of NIHD and the Municipal Charter can work in synergistic tandem in the agricultural sector and lead to decentralization formation. The fulfillment and integration of the agricultural value chain from nurseries to commercialization of processed products that are certified for domestic and global markets, including certifications that ensure a value beyond conventional prices, is the *sine qua non* for alleviating rural poverty. This process depends, of course, on how it is managed. It is also the most effective guarantor of Morocco's biodiversity and environmental optimization, including the eradication of erosion and the maximizing of water efficiency, which the Special Commission Report identifies as critical lifelines for sustainable growth.

Integration of the value chain means that communities of growers are also builders of cooperatives and managers and processors of products, with capacity to directly engage markets and buyers well beyond the immediate locality. This is possible, essential, and, as also noted by the report, requiring of far more accessible and diversified sources of investment, which for the most part is seemingly inaccessible to rural farming families who constitute the majority of the people who experience poverty in the country. NIHD should more significantly emphasize community-based agricultural investments as they are sorely needed.

While the current practices of agriculture prevent people from realizing the sector's opportunities, if they were adaptively transformed, the sector could lift millions of people out of poverty and secure the environment and water availability for decades to come. The interfaith partnership where the Moroccan Jewish community freely lends land to farming communities to build their tree nurseries that utilize local seeds can play an indelible role for the nation to meet its enormous tree demand and is already a proven successful pilot that can be scaled to provide tens of millions of tree saplings annually.^[9] There are exemplary cases of rural women's groups being the primary recipients of lands from the public domain to build their cultivation projects and empowered futures for themselves and families.^[10] In sum, the precision and targeting of investment, ensuring that it is delivered to the communities and their associations and cooperatives, emphasizing when possible the agricultural sector, will achieve the accelerated and multiplied levels of financial returns that will uplift the nation's overall human development.

From Regionalization to Municipalization

Morocco's regional public administrative centers often remain distant from the dispersed communities of their jurisdictions, slowing decision-making and leading to initiatives not well-enough adapted to local contexts. This in turn impedes civil society's ability to participate in decision-making that affects their everyday lives.

Pivoting from regionalization to further devolving power to the municipalities would improve the timelines and management of people-centered initiatives. However, devolution without commensurate people's participation could lead to further social stratification (gender, economic, age) at the local level. It could also create challenges with coordination or information sharing between the municipalities on common needs and best practices if not in accordance with regional guidelines.

Indeed, Morocco's Special Commission Report cites a real impediment to significantly empowering municipalities within the nation's decentralization design: the central level's lack of confidence in the capacities of the people to know and implement the development that they so need. It is first worth noting that the matter of lack of confidence in the public to manage their development is as old as the roots of participatory planning as a practice,

when there was a similar distrust felt by policymakers at central levels of governments during the post-World War II and post-colonial period.^[11]

In Morocco, the capacity of local civil society to catalyze and create sustainable change is seriously concerning due to the lack of experiential learning opportunities, particularly in rural areas, even as the will for improving life conditions is sincere and admirable. However, a manner of overcoming this obstacle for people's empowerment is to actually remain true to the organic growth of the decentralization system, i.e., through the effective actualization of the participatory requirements of the Municipal Charter, backed by NIHD finances.

All who are bear national policymaking responsibility for the decentralization of the Kingdom should be aware that suboptimal outcomes may already be assured by fully relying upon or accepting the regionalization approach rather than one of municipalization or provincialization. We cannot expect that people's management and the bearing of responsibility for their own community's change to be fulfilled when power remains distant, as will be the case under a regional decentralization framework.

That being said, regional councils are ideally made of representatives from public and private agencies that focus on human development and can coordinate with the Ministry of Environment. For example, it would be effective if the projects composed in the municipal development plans were aggregated and submitted to regional councils for NIHD appropriations or financial and technical support from other sources, including ones from the ministries represented.

Preceding *Mourchidat* and Participation with Empowerment

There is a common need today among governments and civil groups in the Middle East and North Africa to further develop explanations, and provide for their multi-faceted dissemination, as to how, for example, decentralization systems, local participatory actions, and women's empowerment have bases in Islamic concepts. Helpful religious and academic analyses and their public propagation could provide an Islamic foundation for policy and programmatic reforms that are initiated by public and civil bodies to promote sustainable community projects and equitable growth. Tracing and widening people's comprehension of sustainability features rooted in Islam could also enhance Western-Islamic shared commitments to specific avenues for development.

For instance, the Islamic tenets of *shura*, *ummah*, *baya*, and *tawhidi* embody qualities of sustainable development; taken together, these religious concepts promote a system of participatory governance that is committed to social justice, accountability of leaders, and local autonomy. In comparing the processes and intended outcomes of sustainable development with a breakdown of these and other concepts in the Islamic tradition, we discover elements that can then inform the design of empowerment workshops.

In Morocco, the *mourchidat* program that trains women in Islamic theology to equip them to deliver the religious-based human service functions as done by imams, other than leading prayers, is an example of having placed women's advancement within an Islamic framework. The approach, which has gained appeal in some sub-Saharan countries as well as in France, espouses everyone's right or obligation to pursue knowledge, work and speak openly, elevate through piety, mentally clear negative emotions, and recognize the statutes of Morocco's family code, including the right to divorce. However, observers question the initiative's intention to achieve gender equality and criticize its acquiescence to patriarchal conditions.

This criticism may not only describe the *mourchidat* program but also participatory development itself. This is because without preceding local community meetings for project identification with self-empowerment sessions to address internalized social controls, self-doubts, fears, and inhibitions, then marginalized groups, including women, may endorse positions that are contrary to their interests, needs, and preferences.

For this reason, the High Atlas Foundation—a US-Moroccan non-profit organization that has been applying the Moroccan development model for twenty years—facilitates the rights-based “Imagine” self-discovery workshops for women, including in the Western Sahara, prior to their participation in collective development planning. While traditionally conducted with women, these workshops have also been adapted for men. Men are inextricably linked to the gender equality effort, particularly in the Moroccan context where traditional attitudes about masculinity can be a significant hindrance to women's empowerment.

Initiated by the Empowerment Institute in New York and adapted to countries in Africa and the Middle East, the Imagine methodology focuses on overcoming limiting beliefs related to seven core areas of life: emotions, relationships, work, money, body, sexuality, and spirituality. Asserting

affirmations on self-defined visions for the future sought enables the subsequent activities of community design of development to then be pursued with a clearer sense of purpose and confidence and result in measures aimed at gender parity, independence, and more freedom. Thus, concerns regarding the impacts of the Moroccan government's *mourchidat* may actually be more of a reflection of the same shortcoming of the participatory approach: that without an empowerment training process from the very outset, the full potential of the participatory approach cannot be achieved due to the fact that vulnerable groups in particular face social constraints, even in settings that could have otherwise accommodated much greater possibilities.

Facilitating the Emergence of Moroccan Decentralization

Just as multi-sectoral partnerships require external facilitation to bring parties together, so does decentralization require synergy among and between the ministerial tiers. Morocco's Ministry of Environment—dedicated to coordinating among other ministries, agencies, and organizations—is in a prime position to create the cross-sectoral and multi-tiered partnerships that embody decentralized management. With departments focused on each of Morocco's regions, the Ministry of Environment can catalyze joint planning of sustainable development by properly incorporating diverse organizations and interjecting social, cultural, financial, and technological considerations into program design.

As a convenor, this Ministry can foster understanding among regional, provincial, and municipal partners on the macro socio-economic and environmental factors and policies that impact development. Furthermore, the processes that the Ministry encourages could help identify and meet the capacity needs of civil and public servants and agencies. The networks that shape decentralization—and ultimately transformation—are formed when the subnational stakeholders cooperatively create and administer programs.

An important, if not necessary, supplementary tactic could be a royal emissary for decentralization who would monitor its realization and forge strategic channels that embed in its operations. The emissary position, on behalf of Morocco's king, can advance agendas, break deadlocks, and bring serious attention to the decentralization objective and the participatory approach for immediate action. The final section of the Special Commission Report recognizes the centrality and the vital ongoing role of King Mohammed VI of Morocco in the mission of sustainable development. His steadfast

dedication to the participatory vision since his ascendancy to the throne in 1999 has resulted into its embedding in the formative national frameworks for growth and justice.

The Ministry of Interior has of course the infrastructure and human resources to be the primary carrier for enacting Moroccan decentralization. Rather than overseeing decentralization throughout the nation, its unequaled level of personnel can instead provide a positive contribution by assisting municipal councils in their outreach and coordination, convey needed authorizations for related activities, and be available to maximize public awareness and inclusive participation.

Development in Moroccan Western Sahara

Applying these policy ideas to the Western Sahara offers great flexibility to deal with difficult poverty. From a Moroccan point of view, it is hard to improve upon the model of enhanced autonomy at the subnational level through decentralization with external support.

The Moroccan model for advanced regionalization is not being implemented in Western Sahara to the extent necessary, and not enough participatory development has occurred, especially with women and those who have been otherwise disenfranchised. There is not across-the-board community mobilization, nor is there adequate financing for those projects to be implemented. There has been a general emphasis on large initiatives that do not have the same impact as smaller ones.

Development movements at the local level require the facilitation of dialogue and formation of local associations and cooperatives from neighborhoods or villages. Such groups are not going to spontaneously come together to start to create consensus on how to define and meet priority needs. They need support in that process to make sure meetings are inclusive and successfully generate development action plans. For example, the High Atlas Foundation has been assisting Western Sahara's Boujdour province in facilitating the participatory development model for capacity-building and project implementation.

Three-quarters of the Boujdour province's approximately 46,000 residents live in Boujdour city.^[12] However, many still are part of nomadic communities. This kind of population distribution poses a challenge to the

participatory approach, which requires being with people where they are, interacting with different ministries and trainers, and engaging in micro-level capacity-building with the same group over time.

Resources are needed to enable the provision of clean drinking water, enhance school infrastructure, and create experiential learning opportunities. Instead of a few major projects, there should be hundreds, if not thousands, of small ones. Resources should go to community-based initiatives first, which will generate the economic vibrancy that will support the larger projects.

Time invested in smaller projects at the local level goes further in achieving the Moroccan goal of national solidarity. Holding community meetings and engaging in dialogue that reflect the local people's history, culture, and past allows people to come to a consensus about what they most want for themselves and their future. As decentralization is intended to respond to the will and heart of the people, it instills buy-in, trust, and unity.

For Morocco, the US recognition of their sovereignty over the Western Sahara does not change the enormity of their task of achieving the mission of decentralization, which advances the vital matters of sustainable development and reconciliation. However, there are likely now more vital resources at-hand moving forward to not only fulfill the design of a participatory kingdom, but to share integrated frameworks for humanity's positive alignment of the needs of an individual person with that of all people.

The Special Commission's final recommendation is to forge a National Development Compact that commits all sectors and government tiers to embrace and fulfill Morocco's dynamism, potential, and sustainability. The national commitment captured in such a compact, one that guarantees local communities' actualization of their visions (which is essentially the national development vision), is a great Moroccan hope to, all at once, move toward.

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