

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. As someone who has been engaged in rural development in Morocco for the past 26 years, I have analyzed how these frameworks can work together and complement each other. Since 2000, I have led a Moroccan-U.S. civil organization that assists local communities in their identification and management of priority development projects—in agriculture, education, health, and women's and youth empowerment—and achieved initiatives located in the 12 regions of Morocco. The community-driven data-gathering, assessments, consensus-building, and overall project experiences engaging with most ministries and administrative tiers have afforded me realistic local and national contextual perspectives.

Morocco's agricultural development programs to promote product cultivation, processing, and commercializing are not making a sufficient difference 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 is the "Achilles' heel" of Morocco's stability and prosperity. Engaging and empowering local communities through financial grants and technical contributions is the best way to successfully address systemic poverty afflicting most rural households along the entire agricultural value-chain - from nurseries to processing.

Agricultural programs understandably put pressure on the entire upstream value chain of raw and processed product. Enormous value is lost by family farmers due to tree and seed dependency, irrigation inefficiency, 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 conservative calculation. Thus, rural people's potential savings, income, and revenue for reinvestment only serve to improve livelihoods elsewhere while they themselves reap no benefit.

Ensuring and expanding rural irrigation infrastructure must be the top priority. Local people 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% or more. Such projects are prohibitively expensive, especially in mountain areas, yet hardly any other project will more greatly improve agricultural production, food security, and income.

In addition, one simple policy shift would make a profound difference for tens of thousands of families – fig and walnut trees (depending on water availability) should be allowed to be planted at high elevations on public domain lands, just as carob is allowed on public domain lands in lower lying ones. 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 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. Government tree nurseries have been closing over the years when they should be at maximum production capacities based on the enormous public demand for trees.

The obvious counter-response to the irrigation recommendation is that there are already similar government subsidy programs (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. Programs should fund nurseries on public land lent to community associations to reduce risk and cost to farmers, as the Moroccan High Commission of Waters and Forests, public schools, universities, and others have done with the High Atlas Foundation (HAF), the U.S.-Moroccan nonprofit organization I founded and help lead that works to strengthen cooperative capacity-building in management and technical areas; organic, food safety, and other certifications; and revolving lines of credit so cooperatives can acquire certified product for processing and sale. These actions have typically resulted in a surge in cultivation and market-ready product, along with improved local organization. The HAF model can be adopted and adapted by other community-based organizations.

But how do we get there? The Municipal Charter, forming community development plans driven by the intended beneficiaries, women and men of all ages, is key for sustainable agricultural project identification and implementation. Project development facilitation is helpful and needed; establishing centers of participatory planning to assist with dialogue, meeting space, and coordination is vital. Provincial governors and other local leaders who understand the important contribution such centers make should exercise greater authority to assign underutilized public or civil building infrastructure for this purpose.

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 decentralization in order to enable local communities and civil and public agencies to make decisions and allocate resources for people's projects. They target rural communities, women, and youth 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 environmental-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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Featured image: An olive tree planted in a schoolyard in the Marrakech region of Morocco. (Source: Author)

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