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Tackling Rural Poverty and Climate Change through Muslim-Jewish Partnership

Marrakech region, Morocco

Goal: to support rural Mountain communities' economic development by planting high-value trees.

Background: Morocco is among the world's most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change and the resulting social and environmental challenges -- from soil erosion and desertification to reduced water resources throughout the country. The highest rates of poverty are experienced in rural Morocco as a result of the large and growing urban-rural poverty gap (*IOM*). Policy responses to climate change have included various approaches but particularly target the agricultural sector. The Green Morocco Plan was launched in 2008 to drive agricultural development at two scales: expanding industrial production for export and investing in smallholders to increase their access to irrigation infrastructure and new markets. It is widely accepted that the plan failed to reach marginalized farmers as promised by the plan's pillar on 'solidarity economics.' Instead, many development actors advocate for an approach that better integrates farmers' and rural community members' economic development in a localized manner. The crops traditionally planted in the High Atlas region are cereals – such as barley and wheat – that have a low market value. Approximately 70% of Morocco's agricultural fields are planted with barley and corn, but only contribute 15% of agricultural revenue (*Ministry of Agriculture*). Outside of the GMP, Morocco launched a campaign to plant one billion trees by 2030 and this project is in line with this effort. Climate change is a multidimensional phenomenon and planting trees across the High Atlas region addresses one part of the problem while increasing access to sustainable livelihoods.

Muslim and Jewish communities have co-existed peacefully throughout Morocco over the last millennium. Throughout the country, Hebrew 'saints' are buried in Jewish cemeteries still maintained by Moroccan and international Jewish networks. Since 2010, the Moroccan government has worked to restore 167 of these burial sites. With this investment in Jewish lands, Jewish leaders started a program of exchange with the High Atlas Foundation (HAF) to lend land surrounding the cemeteries for organic fruit and nut tree nurseries.

Project Summary: Planting trees with HAF addresses myriad issues facing rural communities: it is one step towards mitigating climate change and the environmental degradation resulting from it; it offers rural families a source of revenue due to the high-value fruit and nut trees chosen for planting; and allows one more community to benefit from the Jewish-Muslim partnership established through HAF nurseries.

This project will fund the planting and exchange of **5,000 trees** – a mix of walnut, almond, fig, pomegranate, and olive. This set of trees is chosen based on the environmental suitability for the High Atlas region as well as their capacity for use in value-added products and high market demand. For example, a previous beneficiary community in Asni formed a cooperative and is currently working to start a walnut oil processing facility.

If funded, this project will allow the inclusion of a new village to participate in the nurseries developed by HAF and High Atlas region communities. All the seeds for planting will be sourced through HAF's networks. Local people already possess the skills and knowledge necessary to care for these trees and market their fruit. The project will include a week of workshops with representative community members to teach plant maintenance skills from learning to cultivate to how to prune, graft, and transplant seedlings, etc.

Project Implementation: This project will be carried out over a period of 4 weeks. The first three weeks will be spent preparing for planting through site visits and workshops in the new community joining the HAF tree nurseries network. The first week will be based at HAF's office in Marrakech communicating

with all parties involved to initiate site visits, seed and seedling purchases, transport logistics and to finalize participants. Weeks 2 and 3 will be spent in the field, holding workshops for the new village with leaders and community members who have benefitted from tree distribution, as well as to share success stories from communities that have marketed their harvests through cooperatives, weekly markets, etc. We will rent a vehicle to travel from Marrakech to the different villages across the High Atlas. In the final week we will do the actual planting at pre-determined sites around the new village. All the planting will be done by myself, HAF staff, and community volunteers recruited in the first three weeks.

Timeline: Week 1, July 5-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrive in Marrakech • Meet with HAF at main office • Finalize plant purchase (amount of each tree, which nurseries, and delegate responsibilities)
Week 2, July 12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet nursery managers and community leaders from past projects • Meet with new beneficiaries and communicate on planting priorities • Finalize community volunteers
Week 3, July 19-25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop Week: community members learn about the impact of tree distribution across the High Atlas from past beneficiaries as well as specifics on plant care • Finalize planting schedule
Week 4, July 26-31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planting week! Travel with HAF team to new village and nursery • Community volunteers participating in the week-long effort

Expected Outcomes

Short Term: Community access to 5,000 trees; training on plant maintenance

Long Term: Diversification of rural economy, increase in average community incomes due to sale of high value plants and products; prevention of soil erosion; bolster Muslim-Jewish solidarity

Sustainability: This project taps into an existing network of tree nurseries based in Muslim-Jewish partnership amongst a network of people and associations who are motivated to enhance the economic development of rural Morocco. Environmental sustainability is at the heart of this project which will plant 5,000 fruit and nut trees without the use of agro-chemicals. The relationships between nursery managers, community members of all positionalities, and the High Atlas Foundation are strong and long-standing and will enable the participation of another village community to benefit from the trees planted in Summer 2020 as well as support beyond the project.

Promotion of Peacebuilding

One of today's greatest conflicts is that of Israeli occupation of Palestine. Since 1948, there has been a rise in hostility towards Jewish North Africans who came to be associated with the Jewish state's violence against Muslim Palestinians. However, before the establishment of the Israeli state, Morocco was home to the largest Jewish community in any Muslim country and continues to have the largest Jewish community outside of Israel in the region. Historically, the relationship between Jewish and Muslim communities has been one of exchange and peace. The lending of Jewish lands to support the community development of High Atlas villages stands as a contemporary example of this historic peaceful relationship and serves as an example of Muslim-Jewish goodwill for the world.

This project also addresses the structural violence of poverty, exacerbated by the effects of climate change, by fighting soil degradation and desertification. Revalorizing the land and its economic potential directly addresses the issues of out-migration and lack of economic opportunity to contribute to sustainable livelihoods in the High Atlas.