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► **To cite this version:**

Rachele Borghi, Monica Camuffo. A gender approach to Environmental Education in Morocco. 2007. ⟨hal-01483077⟩

HAL Id: hal-01483077

<https://hal.science/hal-01483077v1>

Preprint submitted on 4 Mar 2017

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HAL Authorization

Borghi, R. e M. Camuffo A gender approach to Environmental Education in Morocco, paper accettato per *4th World Environmental Education Congress*, Durban 2-6 luglio 2007.

A gender approach to Environmental Education in Morocco

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Abstract

In this paper we present as case study the village of Hassilabiad in the Moroccan oasis region and the activities of the Association Hassilabiad (AHT), particularly those addressed to the involvement of the women.

The Moroccan oasis region is subjected to new environmental problems. The Government often delegates their solution to the local administrations that have not the resources to solve them. Therefore the role of the local associations is growing. The Association AHT is facing the problems related to desertification, and also the new emergencies caused by wastes and waste waters, involving a fundamental social actor: the women. Because of their daily activities, women are strongly related to the environment and are those who are directly affected by and have to manage the environmental problems.

Key words: environmental matters, gender issues, rural context, environmental politics, Morocco, desertification

Introduction:

Thanking the co-operation politics among European Union and other Governmental Foundings, the spread of the sustainable development concept, got known that the concept of 'Environmental Education' is more often integrated in the governmental politics about the protection of the atmosphere also in the so-called "Newly Industrialized Countries". The full application of environmental politics that have been founded on a sort of promoted participation governance cannot deny the contribution of the Environmental Education, although only the change of the political system and the civil society in this direction produces this effective contribution (Huckle, 1993). In describing and analyzing the activities of sensibility and Environmental Education the social and political context of realization cannot therefore be neglected.

In this immense universe of the production on the topic, the attribution to the Environmental Education is recurrent to think about the formation of able people to plan; people who make

them responsible choosing about the environment protection; people who can interpret in a critical way the truth and the “proposed solutions” regarding the environmental troubles of one territory, learning to manage the uncertainty deriving from the complexity of the environmental systems (Mortari, 1994; Zanetto, 2000; Gamberoni, 2001). It is not only to promote adequate acquaintances which simply care the environment but that also encourage the ability to develop wide and articulate communication and action systems on it (Semeraro, 1992).

In this job we propose to tell the experience of one small association born in a context that, for a series of reasons of historical and geographic character, has been often neglected from the central authorities respect to other regions of Morocco. For this reason the inhabitants of the Tafilalet¹ have decided to organise themselves and to found a series of associations that allowed to overwhelm gaps of the State and to afford development processes through an approach of collaboration type. *L'Association Hassilabiad pour l'environnement, le développement et la coopération* (AHT) is one of these.

We have chosen this case study because, also being a local association, it is present in all the provinces with plans that involve, under different aspects, the local communities and their villages. Beyond to that, thanks to the job of its representatives and to the increase of the foreign tourism in the region that has allowed many Europeans to enter in contact with this associative truth, the association has acquired in the time an international breath, becoming partner not only of Governmental organisations but also of international ONG.

Our analyses have been based on data that have been collected through interviews and focus group with the members of the Association, the managing committee and naturally the beneficiaries of the plans, in particular the women, even if conscious that woman cannot constitute object of research. The object of one research, indeed, is a theoretical construction that leaves by questions that can be treated on the basis of a female population. At the same time the articulation of the female questions to the problems of the society as a whole will continue to be lacked until that “matter” of the woman will continue to be treated as a different subject altogether (Mahdi, Zahid and Slaoui 2002:163).

Seeing that the identity of the Association found itself on the priority given to the involvement of the local population through the mechanisms of the participation approach, we have tried to lead the job on the basis of these principles. Therefore we managed to deposit

¹ South – Eastern Moroccan region.

near the centre of the association all the results of the researches that have been told us also orally during the schooling course.

We used the French language and, only partially the Moroccan Arab to ask the questions for the interviews. Many of the village female inhabitants of Hassilabiad speak exclusively the *tamazigh*, the translations have been assured from Fatima El Amraoui, who has not simply carried out the local role of interpreter among us, the community and the authorities, but she also contributed to the realisation of the researches, she appears in fact as a co-writer in some texts.

Environmental matters and local resources: Hassilabiad case

The case of the Association Hassilabiad (AHT) is particularly meaningful of the fervour of the civil society that from the Nineties has invested Morocco, as also the diffuse will to promote integrated plans of development. AHT is born in 1998 in the village of Hassilabiad, situated in the province of Errachidia, a not much populated and barren zone, that takes place between the mountains of the Atlas and *hamada* (the desert and generally stony plain).

The village of Hassilabiad places itself close to the famous Merzouga, at the feet of dunes of the Erg Chebbi. The environment is rendered from the insufficient precipitation (inferior to 60-millimetre per year, concentrated in the spring and autumnal storms), from the elevated temperatures, the violence of the wind, the water absence and the consequent reduced vegetation. The installation has started in the Sixties, the population that lives there has a nomadic origin, then they have installed because of the drought, when the caravan and interregional routes have been closed and starting the mines exploitation in the last phase of the colonial period.

Today the village counts approximately 1200 inhabitants but it is in fast expansion because every month one medium of one family of nomads installs itself.

The Association has tried in these years to place remedy to the unfavourable situation in which the population is, in particular the feminine one, and caring to improve its living conditions and relationship with the surrounding environment. The aim is therefore the realization of actions as the construction of infrastructures like a medical pantry, the canalization of the drinkable water and of the electrical current worker; the encouragement and the support to activities that can give birth to the constitution of co-operatives, the valorisation of local savoir-faire, the improvement of the techniques and the traditional methods of production, the use of new techniques of communication in order to

commercialize the handicraft products; the promotion of the cultural and responsible tourism; the encouragement to the schooling of the children, especially the girls.

AHT has been able to concentrate the efforts on the activities to the formation and sensibilisation of the members of the community, leaving from the conjecture that the Education is the only necessary condition in every plan of development. From 1990, the year of the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), that has been kept in Jomtien (Thailandia), the voluntary Associations, together with the ONG and the Governments, have joined the efforts, in Morocco like in the rest of the world, in order to fight the illiteracy, in particular the feminine one. The education of the mothers is considered fundamental for the family and society health. Many aspects connected to the “underdevelopment” like ill-nutrition, insufficient hygienic conditions, ignorance of the familiar planning could be improved fighting the illiteracy of the women (Aagnaou, 2004). It is therefore necessary to comprehend the real causes of the illiteracy, the single woman demanding, in order to single out the practical needs and the strategic ones to study the way in which one can involve them, putting in existence perfect teaching methods that exceed that series of associate-economic obstacles that inhibit the process of female participation.

The schooling courses have been activated in Hassilabiad because it was necessary to reduce the differences of the education level between men and women before every other intervention. As a result, many women have begun to attend the centre of the Association. Thanks to their affluence, these women have become the main interlocutors of the Association, representing a channel of spreading and effective sensitivity near others, that are still far from the associative reality. Moreover, the institution of the sewing and embroidery courses has definitively consecrated the initiative success and has increased the general agreement. The Moroccan Government has in fact financed a project for the purchase of knitting machines for the village women. In this way a traditional activity carried out inside the domestic space as an individual matter, has been transformed in a collective activity exercised in a common space. This has increased the production of handicraft objects for selling as well. Women who live in the rural area, in fact, do not have any kind of fixed salary because their job, both within and outside the domestic area is not paid (CERED 1995). Into the rural villages the female working opportunity is often limited than the male one. Actually they have minor education and they are not specialised in market working activities, therefore they have minor yielding availability (Arena, 1990, p. 126). For these reasons the Association

has tried to encourage the development of female producing activities², taking control of both the professional formation and the schooling.

The schooling and sewing courses are therefore integrated projects, because their simultaneous presence allows to get a series of chain reactions start in the whole community (Borghi and Al Amraoui, 2006).

Environmental emergencies: the integrated association answer

Schooling is not limited to writing and reading competence but it turns out as an advantage to the information broadcasting and to the beneficiaries sensibility in every way. In particular, women are worried about the environmental emergency. For people who live in the oases the main environmental problem has always been represented from the desertification³, that express itself mainly through shelving, flora degradation, ground increasing salinity, draining of the stratum and water and wind erosion (Boudad and Kabiri, 2002)

The Association has tried to take part in the research of solutions through actions that involve all the members of the community: from the promotion of the oasis cultivation to the restoration of the palm groves with the allocation of one date plant care to every family (1500 plants have been distributed), from the *quadrillages*⁴ maintenance to the restoration of the *khattara*⁵, with the cooperation of Spanish association SERAIL.

The arrival of new infrastructures and the increase of the tourists presence in all the province, as it is brought back in some statistics of the Ministry of Tourism⁶ (2006), have established fast changes in life style and in the impact of the daily environmental activities.

An important change has been recorded when, two years ago, the village has been connected to the waterworks. An alteration of the resource management modalities with water has begun: from the drastic reduction of the present asses (once every family possessed a couple

² See Alaoui 1989 about the female role into the productive process in the rural contest.

³ One cannot forget that the desertification trouble have been made instrumental, somehow. To think in a critical way about this, see Faggi, 1991 or Davis. 2005.

⁴ Shelving defensive systems constituted by windbreak barriers realized with palm leaves that are orthogonally placed towards the strongest wind direction.

⁵ Traditional system of water basement collection and adduction widespread all over the Arabic world. It takes advantage of the different piezometric level and the cliffs and sediments permeability in order to transport the water towards the oasis even if they are far from it. In the case of Hassilabiad the *khattara* is developed for approximately two kilometers.

⁶ *Ministère du Tourisme, de l'Artisanat et de l'Economie Sociale*

of asses to transport the water, today in the village one can count only five of them) to the increase of the water consumption per capita. From little litres per day, in fact, the use of water now is about one medium of 30m³ per trimester for the families and to a maximum of 500m³ for the hotels. Unfortunately, as it happens in many other zones of the Moroccan territory, no ways of removal/treatment of used water have been previewed. Today the village must face new problems connected with the unhealthiness and the pollution risk of the water strata, still used like source of drinkable water and for the irrigation of the oasis. Beyond that, the greater presence of tourists and the relative facility of movement of the inhabitants are contributing to increase the solid rubbish. The phenomenon is assuming worrisome dimensions not only in relation to the rubbish amounts but above the quality of it. The Moroccan system previews that the rubbish management is assigned to the local communities, but only the recent law on the rubbish management (6 July 2005) has begun to set the selling off modalities, interesting all the great areas of the city. In the province we are considering here, as an example, a selling off system of the solid rubbish does not exist, this compels the communities to manage the problem independently. The rubbish amount produced from the inhabitants of Hassilabiad has gone added to the one produced by tourists, which consume more bags, bottles of water, plastic container of any kind.

Lacking a collection and deposit system of the rubbish, until some time ago people including tourists abandoned their not organic rubbish (not used by pets or animals) in the surrounding of the villages. The wind action and the oasis proximity may let one think about an illicit rubbish dump, where the colours of the agricultural products mixed together with those of the bottles and of the plastic bags. The association has made itself as a promoter in consultations in order to find some possible solutions. In parallel with the research of technical solutions that must involve public organisations and must afford long times to wait, the Association has tried to favour the population self-consciousness about these emergencies, regarding at the time the rubbish one through a detailed program of sensibility. The Shareholders' Meeting⁷ has established to create one 'regular rubbish dump' in a land plot of common property ground. The educational campaigns inside of the village have set near the undertaken actions. There have been organised some reflection topics about “ *Pour un désert propre et authentique*” in order to let the local authorities, the inhabitants of Hassilabiad, the Merzouga neighbour and the association of the hotel owners talk to each other.

⁷ The Shareholders Meeting is composed from the representatives of the village families that gather themselves to take decisions regarding the whole community (see Borghi e El Amraoui 2005 on the relationship between Shareholders Meeting and Hassilabiad Association).

The involvement of the hotel owners has turned out fundamental, with the enormous contribution that the tourists have given to the problem. The Association has stimulated indeed the hotel owners to become promoters of new kinds of participation like the purchase of empty drums to use like temporary containers for rubbish, especially for tourists. Moreover, they have realised with the Association a great sign put at the entrance of the oasis with the exhortation: "Let's protect the environment!".

The schooling course has been the main vehicle of sensibility on the solid rubbish management topic; this is due to the fact that housework is assigned to women. The teachers, who have been trained by the members of the Association in collaboration with the state institutions, have explained to the women the importance of the oasis respect inviting them to place the rubbish in the common space. Replies of the graveness of such participation have been the clean rubbish lessening in the oasis and in the village, but also the comments of the women who participate to the course. All the interviewed women declared to have learned something more than to read and to write, and many of them emphasised to realise the importance of respecting nature, not only for the common health but also for an issue of 'image': a clean desert becomes a tourist attraction⁸! They have moreover emphasised as studying the Corano at the course has helped them to become aware of the respect of the others, that for them means to soil the common parts of the village as well.

Debate

The lack of a real support from the administrations does not currently let the population other choice but the one to burn their rubbish, without taking care about the damages on the health. According to one of the women who have been interviewed, respectable people acknowledgement goes through the ashes reduction of the rubbish, in the way that they would not scatter to the village when the wind is raised. This claim shows one of the limits of the participation of the Association, that focuses exclusively at the sensibility to the aim to create new behaviours, partially more respectful towards the environment (not to widespread the garbage) but dangerous at the same time (in burning it). The Association AHT experience is

⁸ One cannot forget that the government in seeing tourism as the fastest and easiest way to support the economic increasing influences all citizens.

paradigmatic under different aspects. On a way, to be really effective, the Environmental Education must aim to construct critical mentalities better than giving life to new behaviours. The lacked training of people who are responsible for the Association on the topic of environment and Environmental Education in particular, has determined the promotion of behaviours that expose, above all the women, to hazardous health conditions. On the other hand, the actions promoted through the involvement of the local community realised one fundamental topic of the Environmental Education: to try to adapt oneself to the contingent situation and the reference context. In particular, in the rural surroundings it would be a limit or even a counter-productive fact to give the sensibility task to the school only, as school can only catch up one small part of social actors about environment. The promoted educational action of such associations permit to catch up a wider number of customers and, through involvement methods determined on approaching people problems and the research of participation solutions, can take note of the emergencies and contribute to their control both individually, and in a collective way. At the same time this type of activity together with the Association visibility allows the birth and the consequent development of a kind of net on the national territory, just to make a single experience revive in common. The net is in fact composed from homogenous actors (associations) or heterogeneous ones (public associations, administrations, local communities etc.), and it is fundamental because it allows to try and to experience solutions according to contingent problems and because it offers the possibility to develop technical competencies as well. The realisation of the environment value and the importance to consider the public spaces as a private one, constitutes the real capital to invest and to use when Hassilabiad will be able to care of a properly said rubbish dump. The present changes can find in the local culture an important resource in order to alleviate the conflicts that can emerge if some reference belongs to different cultural systems.

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