

**Presentation of Meryem Essafi, Speaker, 56<sup>th</sup> Annual DPI/NGO Conference,  
*Human Security and Dignity: Fulfilling the Promise of the United Nations*  
Wednesday, 10 September 2003, United Nations Headquarters, New York**

## **Morocco: Towards a modern society despite daunting challenges.**

(Large Extracts)

By Meryem Essafi

Deputy chair of the Moroccan Guild for Environmental & Development Writers

Morocco is striving to be a State governed by Law and Order and by the legitimacy of democracy. To do this, the country is preparing the right infrastructure for investments by promoting enterprises. It also aims to reach a level of social peace by solving various cases relating to human rights and by compensating the victims of political kidnappings and secret detentions. Morocco is also trying a new political experience by allowing the opposition to reach power. This had led to a political détente that has been visible all over the country. In the same spirit, the latest legislative elections of September 2002 were considered to be the most open and honest in the history of the country. Most of the political parties did not argue about the results of these elections, as had been the case in the past. Furthermore, the elections allowed a sizeable number of women to reach the Parliament. More than 10 % of MPs currently in parliament are women. This is unprecedented both in the Arabic country and in the most of developing world.

In the same spirit, many political and legal initiatives have been taken. Politicians, intellectuals and the media have called these initiatives “the democratic conversion”. Before, these initiatives that helped the opposition to reach power used to be called “the Democratic Process”.

These achievements happen in a social situation marred by high unemployment, the slow rise of the national income, poverty, lack of the basic infrastructure in the rural areas, the inefficiency of the administration and the inadequacies of the judicial system.

Because of these shortcomings in the social sector, the environment in Morocco is paying a heavy price due to a high birth rate, urbanization, the vagaries of the weather and the lack of natural resources. These factors have a direct impact on the health of the citizens and the quality of their lives. The costs of the deterioration of the environment in Morocco are estimated to be more than 20 billion Dirhams per year, (2 billion dollars), which is the equivalent of 8.2 % of the gross national product.(1)

Two of the main environmental problems in Morocco are water and soil.

On the matter of water, the rate per capital reached a critical level, ie less than 1000 cubic meters despite the policy of dam building implemented by Morocco immediately following it's independence. But the huge demand of the agriculture sector combined with the aging supply network that results in the waste of 35 % of the drinking water and the waste of more than 50 million cubic meters due to the clogging of dams by silt, does not help the situation. To make things worse, the water quality is deteriorating because of industrial and agricultural pollution.

Soil represents a strategic resource for a country where agriculture is the main component of the national economy. Soil in Morocco is suffering from desertification, bad agricultural practices,

the urbanization of agricultural land, water erosion and leaching. Every year, more than 100millions/tonnes/year are wasted because of all these factors combined.(2)

Meanwhile, the liberalization of the Moroccan foreign trade and its membership of the World Trade Organization may have a positive impact on Morocco's economic growth. On the negative side, this will have a nefarious impact on the environment. There have been no studies carried out on the impact on the environment in Morocco following the consequences of its agreement with the European Union, its membership in the World Trade Organization and the forthcoming signing of the free trade zone agreement with the United States.

Compared with the early nineties, we know more about the environmental situation of Morocco. All the studies show that the country is destroying more and more of its natural resources to obtain a meager economic growth that did not exceed 1% over the last few years. If the country managed an average economic growth of 4,5 % during the last 2 years and is hoping to achieve a 5% growth during the period 2000-2004,(3).

Morocco is still facing some daunting challenges when it comes to its development. Unemployment at the national level is at 13 %. In 2001, it was at 19.05% in urban areas and in 2000 it reached 21.05%.

In the education and public health sectors, there are some encouraging signs. For the school year 2001-2002, 90 % of 6 year olds attended school compared to 66.5 % for the school year 1999-2000.(4). This year, officials are talking of a level of 100% following the decision to force parents to send their children to school, especially in rural areas where teaching was lagging behind and where girls were not sent to school for socio-cultural reasons. The Moroccan government is paying more attention to rural areas. This can be seen through the national programme to provide these areas with potable water.

In 2001, 58 % of rural areas had potable water compared with 43 % in 2000 and 38 % in 1999.(5). This effort led to many children going to school instead of collecting water. Furthermore, an effort has been made by the Moroccan government to supply rural areas with electricity. Now, 50 % of rural areas have access to the electricity grid.

In the health sector, only 15% of the population had access to medical coverage in 1999. Now, this rate has reached 30%.(6), and the aim of the Moroccan government is to reach 100% coverage following the adoption by the parliament of an act stipulating the obligatory medical insurance, and the cabinet's decision to help the poorest section of the population have access to medical assistance.

One of the main sectors in the Moroccan economy is tourism. Morocco is planning to attract 10 million tourists a year by the year 2010.

While it is not possible to mention all the efforts deployed by Morocco for sustainable development, what can be said with certainty is that the officials are convinced that it is impossible to have stability and democracy while there are huge social disparities. Some analysts in Morocco went to the extent of saying that the Casablanca terrorist bombings of last May were closely linked to the social situation in the country. These events have brought together all the components of the Moroccan society who are determined more than ever that the only way forward is to work toward sustainable development in all its aspects.

In this field, the role of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is vital. While the

organizations working in human rights, women rights and health campaigns are thriving, those working in the social field are lagging behind. There are around 400 NGOs working in the social sector. Most of them are new: 57% were created after 1992, 20% between 1987 and 1992 and 23% before 1987. This means that around 80% of the more active NGOs have been around for no more than 12 years.(8) Most of their activities are seminars and round tables while their work should be in the fields, talking and listening to people, understanding their problems and gaining their confidence. Some NGOs have no clear vision of their mission and lack the right human resources. One of the main factors affecting the work of these NGOs is the fact that decision making is down of one or a handful people. This seriously affects the work of these organizations. Voluntary work means that members do not feel responsible for the rest of the society. Despite all these shortcomings, some NGOs have been very successful and showed that they can be a useful contributors in co-operative development such as the fight against illiteracy, the national plan for sustainable development and joint ventures in strategic planning (Tetuan Province).

These experiences are worth encouraging to help the associative work gain the confidence of the normal citizen who then can be mobilized and can used as a pressurizing force in case policies implemented by politicians sway from the objectives of sustainable development.

Sustainable development can pay a heavy price because of the intervention of international forces that can use an array of economical, technological and media tools to impose its policies on the rest of the world and to change its aspects in the future. In doing so in the economic field, these forces are trying to make the whole world one market by liberalizing trade, services and investments among other things. They are trying to destroy barriers and borders. This intervention goes beyond economics to affect other fields such as politics and culture. Foreign interventions can be clearly seen through the increasing role played today by multinational companies.

In the absence of any means to measure the public opinion reactions vis-à-vis those questions and choices relating to sustainable development, we can only rely on some general remarks and observations to gauge the public opinion by analyzing the election results. The problem in Morocco is that most of the parties' manifestos are becoming to look similar. Both left and right hand political parties have the same objectives and the same priorities, but no clear strategy on how to achieve or put them in practice. During the last decades, many promises to find solutions to the social problems have not been kept. With the deterioration of the social situation, it has become difficult even for the opposition parties to make an impact. After they reached power, the opposition failed to find work for the millions of unemployed and did not take the right action against those who stole public money. This situation led to a disaffection of the general public from politics. One sign was the law turnout during the last legislative elections in September 2002 when only 51% of the electorate used their vote. This critical situation should cause the political parties to question the way parties are structured and the way they operate. Today more than any other time, there is the urgency to adopt a new law relating to political parties so that they can play their constitutional role.

The media too has to monitor the general political and popular issues. It has to be the link between the politicians who are the decision makers and the normal citizen. It has the task of mobilizing the public opinion to assess the success or failure of the chosen programmers and

strategies. Unfortunately, the Moroccan media suffers from misunderstanding between the officials and the real practices, mainly when it comes to justice, the fight against illiteracy and the protection of the environment. Another serious question that needs an urgent answer is: what kind of media do we want in Morocco? Does it need to be efficient? Do we need a discerning public opinion or one that is just acquiescing?

The Moroccan media achieved some good results when it was associated to some national campaigns like the fight against illiteracy, infant health and some solidarity campaigns.

To summarize, I say that Morocco is facing many challenges. At the same time, there are so many sectors where improvement is required. The Moroccan citizen should be more involved in the development process. He must have more confidence in his institutions, in the media, the political parties and the trade unions. He should also have more faith in the executive, legislative and judiciary systems. Time is running out if Morocco wants to become a modern society. To do so, the country has no choice but to believe in more democracy and be a country of law and order where everyone is aware of his role. The relationship between the authorities and the normal citizen should be reviewed and based on the needs of the citizen. There is also a need for more dialogue and openness. One of the pre-requisites of a modern society is also equality and solidarity. The Moroccan economy should be restructured to be able to face international competition and be up to date with technological development. Sustainable development should be achieved without negatively affecting the regional and environmental equilibriums.

## **References:**

- (1)
- (2) Department of Environment
- (3)
- (4)
- (5) Ministry of Planning and Economics
- (6) General direction of water
- (7) National Report of Human Development 1999-1998