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Fez—Where Poverty Reduction Meets Cultural Preservation

The goals of cultural preservation and poverty reduction might at first glance seem worlds apart. However, a closer look at the Moroccan city of Fez shows how they can work together in a creative partnership.

Countries with a high incidence of poverty often find it difficult to commit scarce resources to the preservation of artistic treasures and historic sites. The Government of Morocco, with the help of the United States government, is investing in the country's cultural resources to help fight poverty. When Morocco applied for a Millennium Challenge Corporation compact, it included in its proposal a project that sought to reduce poverty by rehabilitating six historically important sites in the ancient Medina of Fez, and investing in the preservation and growth of Morocco's centuries-old artisan sector. Nearly \$112 million of Morocco's \$698 million compact, signed in August 2007, is devoted to investments in the Fez Medina, as well as programs to support artisan production and promotion as well as to improve literacy and vocational education.

The investments in Fez will reduce poverty by stimulating the Medina's main industries—tourism and artisan production. They are estimated to directly benefit 20,000 low-income workers in the Fez Medina. The artisan production activities will help improve the income of over 3,200 artisans in greater Fez and Marrakech.

Fez, with a population of approximately one million, is Morocco's fourth largest city. It is also the site of an ancient Medina, the city's walled center that dates from the 9th century and is renowned for its magnificent architecture, labyrinthine streets and traditional artisans. The Medina, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is amongst



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the most densely populated urban areas in the world and one of its largest contiguous car-free urban zones. It has for centuries been described as the historic, cultural, architectural

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about Fez, Morocco and its compact
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and religious heart of Morocco. With its many shops and artisan production facilities, it still serves as a main marketplace and economic hub for the city. Yet, parts of the Medina suffer from neglect, which has taken a socio-economic toll on the most vulnerable among its population, an estimated 30% of which lives below the poverty line.

The six Fez Medina sites were chosen for renovation because of their clear potential to generate economic growth and benefits to the poor by stimulating tourism spending, new jobs and renewed investment in the Medina. The sites include four foundouks, large multi-story structures surrounding a central courtyard that were historically used as lodging for traveling merchants. They will be rehabilitated to be used as spaces for artisan production and sales and for other community, cultural and commercial uses.

The two other sites are Place Lalla Ydouna, a square that serves as an important access point to the Medina, and the Makina, a 24-acre area that spans the Makina building (a former munitions factory), and the Grand Mouchouar (a vast courtyard originally intended for the Sultan to address his subjects). The project will fund an international design competition that will call on architects from around the world to propose designs that will revitalize these sites and transform them into spaces that can both serve residents and attract visitors to Fez.

“MCC is extremely excited to be involved in the design competition” says Rick Gaynor, the MCC lead on the Fez Medina project. “We hope that it will generate innovative, world-class architectural ideas that will stimulate the Medina’s economy, while respecting its great cultural and architectural traditions.”

“The activities funded by the MCC represent a new generation of rehabilitation projects whose impacts will go beyond economic and social benefits to help reposition the Medina of Fez in relation to the other major heritage cities of the world,” said Fouad Serrhini General Director of the Agency for the Dedensification and Rehabilitation of the Medina of Fez (ADER-Fès), which is the implementing entity for this project.

The project will also support different aspects of artisan production and trade. It will improve the national training system for literacy and vocational education to benefit artisans and the general population, particularly women and girls. It will assist potters in the Fez and Marrakech areas in meeting growing demand for high quality Moroccan pottery by investing in modern techniques and equipment, including cleaner, gas-burning kilns to replace traditional, high-polluting, wood-burning ones, while maintaining old artisan know-how and practices. It aims to provide artisans with technical assistance to access financial services from local banks and microcredit associations. Activities will also focus on marketing campaigns to highlight artisans and their crafts, including promoting a label to clearly distinguish genuine Moroccan crafts from imitations and a campaign to promote Moroccan artisan exports.

Morocco is a trailblazing and unique example of how cultural preservation and poverty reduction can go hand-in-hand. The preservation of Morocco’s cultural heritage is a viable and sustainable means of opening new economic opportunities for exceptionally gifted, but extremely poor, artisans and their families. The MCC-Morocco compact stands at the crossroads where cultural preservation and social action for the benefit of the poor meet.