

Drivers of Socioeconomic Development and Underdevelopment in Moroccan Sahara



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1 Introduction

The topography is the major reason for the underdevelopment of the Sahara province. Southern Provinces or Moroccan Sahara or Sahara province geographically consists of the southern part of Morocco. The topography is mainly made up of low, flat desert with large areas of rocky or sandy surfaces rising to small mountains in the south and the northeast. The lowest point is the salt flat of SebhetTah at 55 m below sea level, and the highest (unnamed) point is 463 m. The Saharan climate is continental; the winters are cold and dry, while the summers are scorching. The temperature can rise above 50° in the shade. Due to the proximity of the ocean, the humidity is relatively high, so the weather is unpleasantly humid. The dryness of the weather is perceivable by the rainfall statistics, which is utterly minimum with an average value of merely 45 mm, even in Dakhla, lying on the ocean shore. The wind is an active agent and brings significant problems all over the Saharan territory as it carries the sand particles. It can cause skin irritation or inflammation of the eye, which causes the locals to cover their heads and faces with a scarf always. The most unpleasant is the windstorm which is locally called 'Irifi'. The extremely dry and hot wind arriving from the northeast is called 'Sirocco', which covers everything with sands causing minimal visibility between 1 and 2 m. The storms occur between October and March, but sometimes in the summer, though not very frequently (Damis 1983:2).

Sahara province's territory is stretched over a vast area of 102,703 sq miles (266,000 sq km), NW Africa, a northern part of Morocco. It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean along the west, Algeria along the northeast, and Mauritania along

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the east and south. The 2007s estimate of population is 382,617 in this province. El Aaiun, having a population of 198,200, is the largest city in this region. The currency is called 'Tala' (Territory 2020: emphasis mine). This region is divided into four districts—Laayoune, Essemara, Boujdour, and Oued Essemara. Essemara is highly arid and almost entirely covered with stones, gravel, or sand. The eastern rocky highlands is reached up to 1500 ft (460 m). The main towns are Laayoune (formerly El Aaiún), Dakhla (formerly Villa Cisneros), Boujdour, and Essemara. Along the coastal area, cold offshore air currents produce fog and heavy dew.

Damis (1983) has classified the Sahara province into two divisions—Saguiet El-Hamra in the north having 31% of the land and Wadi ed-Dahab (Rio de Oro) in the south having 69% of the land. Dry riverbeds characterize the northern zone. Saguiet El-Hamra, the most important one, is known as the 'Red Canal' and lends its name to the region. It accumulates the surface run-off that occurs during the short rainy seasons, generally in the autumn. Because of the high temperatures, most of the water vaporizes before it reaches the sea. Sufficient vegetation for grazing grows along its banks, and barley and corn are cultivated at Smara.

In Wadi ed-Dahab, the ground is too permeable to retain the autumn waters and too flat to flow; hence, water is stored in the subsoil, and there are only a few scattered wells. Around the coastline, apart from a few minor settlements, there are no living habitations.

The majority of the people earn for a living as fishermen or by raising camels. Their number increases with the approximately 160,000 Moroccan fishermen, who temporarily work on the coastline in the summer and early autumn (Besenyo 2009:17).

Rain is rare, and there are no permanent water bodies. Saharawis faces a significant problem of water scarcity as they had no place for drinking water. This hardship in the life of Saharan tribes compels them to rush to different places, and, consequently, no social organization has come into the forefront in this region.

The population is predominantly made up of Arabs and Berbers. The pastoral nomads migrate into the territory during the rainy season. Both Hasaniya Arabic and Moroccan Arabic are spoken as most of the population is Sunni Muslim (Territory 2020: emphasis mine).

The political organization of the Saharan tribes was typical. Inter-tribal wars have been a significant feature of desert societies in the past. The hard realities in the desert were that all the tribes used to compete for pastoral resources, water resources, and livestock, all of which were scarce in the desert. There were no significant forms of human organizations or supra-tribal state authority that could maintain order in Sahara. At this backdrop, there were no modern kinds of tribal political organizations. Each tribe or fraction regulated its affairs through an assembly called 'Djemma'. It consisted only of the heads of families who enjoyed due respect because of their bravery, age, wisdom, piety, or wealth (Saxena 1995).

The Djemma framed laws to supplement the Islamic judicial code, Sharia, and appointed a judge to administer justice. At the tribal level, this assemble was known as the Council of Forty. The Council of Forty used to be called in session in time of war or grave crisis, to organize the tribe's defense or a raid, and to appoint a military commander (Saxena 1995:6).

The inhospitable nature, the vastness of the desert, the sparseness and dispersion of its population discouraged government authorities stop raiding one tribe against another as the other was living hundreds of miles away, which were quite common in those days. The main object of these raids was to capture livestock. Such raids were not difficult for the desert tribes despite the inhospitable terrain. They had enough meant of war such as camels and firearms besides their riding ability and the knowledge about the terrain. Sometimes some tribes would enter into alliances or pacts for mutual protection and assistance necessitated by the insecurity of the violent desert. The crop cultivation did not occupy an important place in the economy of the desert because of the absence of oases. Moreover, the nomads hated rendering services as agricultural laborers. The tribes were employed chiefly as slaves for the cultivation of barley in the rain—collecting depressions. Besides agriculture, fishing also remained an untrusted source of occupation to most of the Saharawi people. They were not engaged in fishing despite the Atlantic Ocean off the Sahara province coast, which was very rich in marine resources and fishes. However, only the tribes with more impoverished economic conditions living in coastal areas were engaged in fishing.

The camel and the goat meat were their needs as far as the food habits are concerned. Camel's hair was used to weave the nomad's tents; its skin was used as leather, and its milk as part of their diet. In order to meet their other needs, the nomads used to visit important trading centers where they used to exchange their camels or their wool and skins for cereals, tea, sugar, weapons, and other manufactured goods (Damis 1983:7).

Sometimes they also acted as guides for caravans passing through the desert. These are the most important things for the tribal people in the region as they were totally dependent on this kind of works. It is difficult to say about the total population of the Saharawi population in Sahara province as it is not possible to have exact head-counts.

The desert's physical conditions are mainly responsible for the underdevelopment as the indigenous people living here move from one area to another in search of water and pastures for their animals regardless of international frontiers. Therefore, at any time, their numbers within a fixed territory have fluctuated considerably. Moreover, a large number of the Saharawi population had to leave or were forced out of the territory in the wake of armed resistance against Spanish and French forces in the late 1950s.

Many Saharawi settled in Morocco after being forced out of the territory of Western part of Sahara. A large number of Saharawi left the territory (even before 1975) for economic or other reasons to live temporarily or permanently along with their tribal kinsfolk beyond the

frontier. Further, because of the close affinity Saharawi of Western part of Sahara and interference of the neighboring countries, made it difficult to decide which Saharawi are indigenous to Sahara and which are not (Saxena 1995:7).

In contrast, Morocco always used to be a hereditary monarchy enjoying absolute powers, and in Mauritania, it was the strongest tribe used to rule over the weaker ones. The Sahara tribe rarely used to assemble at one place as they were scattered over huge distances in small groups.

Sahara's economy is dependent on pastoral nomads, fishing, and phosphate mining (Table 1). Along with it, the history of economic exploitation, under the privilege of four districts of Sahara province such as Laayoune, Essemara, Boujdour, and Oued Essemara, demands a considerable degree of autonomy within Morocco (Ottaway 2012). It will forge a sociopolitical culture characterized by interpersonal interchanges and better marketing relations. Specifically, this is a move toward the decentralization of geo-natural resources, strengthening the cooperation of provinces toward the Center, the Center provides the necessary minimum basic needs (bread, cloth, and shelter) to all, and it is a move toward the development of civil society (Achy and Sekkat 2014: emphasis mine).

The traditional economy is limited to raising goats, camels, and sheep and the cultivation of date palms. There is a limited scope of coastal fishing as well. Large deposits of phosphates at Boukra (near Laayoune) were first functioned by a Spanish-controlled firm in the early 1970s, and at present, Morocco has taken control of the firm. Potash and iron deposits exist at Agracha. There is a growing tourist industry also (Table 1).

It is the time to visualize and analyze the economic plunder and exploitation of natural resources by the colonial powers and leave the Sahara province's future in the geopolitical conflicts. A limited transportation network severely hinders the region. The main seaports are Dakhla and Laayoune, through which the phosphates and dried fish are exported, while fuel and foodstuffs are the principal imported commodities. The mineral industry serves as the largest foreign exchange earning sector in Morocco. It usually accounts for about 35% of foreign trade and about 6% of the gross domestic product (Harold 2008).

Table 1 Southern Sahara Region

Languages	Hasaniya Arabic and Moroccan Arabic
Ethnicity/Race	Arabs, berbers, and nomadic
Religion	Islam (Sunni)
Agriculture and livestock	Cultivation of date palms, sheep, and camel
Industries	Dry fish, phosphates, potash, iron, and tourism
Natural resources	Phosphates, iron ore, manganese, lead, zinc, fish, and salt
Communication	Mobile and wireless

Source The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (2010), 6th ed. 2007. Columbia University Press. <http://www.infoplease.com>. Accessed on 22 Oct 2010: emphasis mine

Current mining legislation in Morocco is based on Mining Code Bill No. 1-73-412 of August 13, 1973. Regulations concerning the management of petroleum and natural gas resources were revised in 1992 to provide further international companies incentives. The gross weight of Phosphate rock as per the available data of 1997 that includes Western Sahara was 23,084 thousand tons (Harold 2008: emphasis mine).

2 Geopolitical Drivers of Underdevelopment

Sahara province, geopolitically being rich natural resources, has become a bone of attraction for the neighboring countries, particularly Algeria. The Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario), based in the Tindouf region of Algeria, is demanding the separation of Sahara from Morocco.

That the conflict has fallen into the grip of an apparently irreconcilable political stalemate suggests that for each party the status quo is something between tolerable, at least preferable to the likely alternatives, and for some perhaps even desirable (Zoubir and White 2016:128).

The costs are also regional, as the unresolved conflict impedes North African integration (Zoubir 2010:72). Today, the Polisario is working from the Tindouf camp, a territory from Algeria bordering the western part of Sahara, and is involved in the political disruption.

Mohamed Cherkaoui pointed out that sociologically, it concerns the social bond between Saharawis and the rest of the Moroccan population.

It has never been dealt with as systematically and rigorously as it deserves. I devoted the bulk of analyses of it and tested the hypothesis that these bonds do exist, that they are not just historically established but that they form today a social fabric of such homogeneity, density, and power that can hardly be ignored in any final settlement of the Sahara problem (Cherkaoui 2007: x: emphasis mine).

It is noteworthy that today Morocco continues to complete its integrity like India who got independence in 1947, achieved complete territorial integrity and unity after the recuperation of Goa, Diu and Daman from the Portuguese in 1961 and Pondicherry from French colonizers in 1963. Geopolitics, regionalism, and territorial integrity issues remind the world that the Polisario during the Cold War had received the military armaments through the USSR and other socialist camps (Algeria, Libya, and others) of Africa. However, the post-1990s hard reality is that Polisario has no weapon support from anywhere except Algeria. The common Saharawis are looking forward to an amicable solution on the issue of development of the Western part of Sahara. Moroccan Government has raised this issue of Sahara in the UNO several times, but it became the 'action-reaction' story of Cold War politics. As a result, this issue is still debated on different platforms.

Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, the then President of India, reiterated during his opening speech on July 25, 2012, and reminded the world:

Peace is the first ingredient of prosperity. History has often been written in the red of blood; but development and progress are the luminous rewards of a peace dividend, not a war trophy. The two halves of the 20th Century tell their own story. Europe, and indeed the world, reinvented itself after the end of the Second World War and the collapse of colonization, leading to the rise of great institutions like the United Nations. ... We are in the midst of a fourth World War; the third was the Cold War, but it was very warm in Asia, Africa, and Latin America till it ended in the early 1990s. The war against terrorism is the fourth; and it is a World War because it can raise its evil head anywhere in the world. India has been on the frontlines of this war long before many other recognized its vicious depth or poisonous consequences (The Hindu 2012).

The revised Moroccan constitution of 2011 is an initiative to resolve the Sahara dispute and work for territorial integrity within the new constitution's framework. The Finance Minister of India has expressed India's support on the Sahara issue for the UN-led political process and acknowledges Morocco's effort to reach a long-lasting and mutually acceptable solution to the territorial dispute (India Opinion 2020: emphasis mine).

The Indian Finance Minister, on the Western Sahara issue, has expressed India's support for the UN-led political process. He has also expressed India's acknowledgment of Morocco's efforts for reaching a long-lasting and mutually acceptable solution to the territorial disputes.

It has adopted the chapter on regionalism. Regionalism has frequently been associated with tribalism in some of Africa's new nations, and Morocco is not an exception. Article III of the Constitution of Morocco confirms the fundamental constituents of the diversified Moroccan identity. These tribal communities, whether in India, South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, or Morocco, are reinforced by marked linguistic, cultural, and other traditional peculiarities. The Morocco constitution's characteristic feature provides enough space for the growth of regionalism (see Article XI, Regional and local democracy, and advanced regionalization) (The Constitution of Morocco 2011). However, 'the Moroccan State certainly retain its powers in the royal domains, especially those related to defense, external relations and the constitutional and religious prerogatives of His Majesty the King' (El Ouali 2012: emphasis mine) (Figs. 1 and 2).

Geographically, the post-1990s globalization has broken the backbone of the Polisario Naxalite Movement and monetary assistance related to it. Supporters of this divisive ideology have collected millions of dollars as income in the name of freedom, redistribution of wealth, and equality until the 1990s (shared during my meeting with the Saharawi people in 2018). The Western Sahara Separatist Polisario Front's 'unilateral' decision to evacuate all foreign aid workers from its Tindouf refugee camps is yet another indicator of the volatility of the Sahara's security situation.

The Algerian-backed separatist guerilla movement is headquartered in Southwest Algeria, where hundreds of Polisario fighters are stationed. Recent press reports indicate that dozens of former Polisario fighters who fled the refugee camps to join terrorist camps in Northern Mali have returned to Tindouf since the beginning of French military operations in Mali (Hassan Masiky 2013).



Fig. 1 Typical Moroccan Sahara topography, snapped in 2018. *Source* Suresh Kumar

Polisario’s vicious ideology presently does not get any income or political support from the world community in the name of the revolution. Polisario has changed its financial income tactics and has given it the name of humanitarian donation, medical support and roof for all, hygienic food for all, and support for Polisario in UNO since the 1990s. The author (S. Kumar) has spoken in the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) of the United Nations Organizations at New York on October 09, 2012, and received the Polisario activities’ details based on its ideology.

Mr. Braham Ghali, Secretary-General of the National Secretariat of Polisario, has used these millions of dollars in his personal use and found drowned in corruption (MAPE, 29 May 2020: emphasis mine).

The historical ‘truth’ of the ‘revolutionary’ leader’s corruption cases has come out only after the political change in their countries. Polisario’s vicious ideology has befooled the Saharawi’s people at large. Their leadership has enjoyed a lavish lifestyle on humanitarian donations and having significant bank balances of black money. Reviewing the historical development of Morocco shall be twofold.

- Firstly, to delineate the politico-geographical factors that were primarily responsible for creating among the constituent units strong regional identities and the consequent desire for separate existence and



Fig. 2 Tan-Tan Festival, Moroccan Sahara, 2018. *Source* Suresh Kumar

- Secondly, to isolate the factors that overwhelmed their feelings for separatism and persuade them to unite into a functioning regionalism.

From the two sets of factors, one would proceed to infer the general relationships among the Center and Sahara region. It has helped to raise the geopolitical regionalism in each case and arrived at specific hypotheses regarding the origin of regionalism in Morocco (Kumar 2013: emphasis mine).

3 Sahara Autonomy and Issues of Development

Sahara province has been experiencing the approach of self-determination of decentralization for the last decade. The statute of autonomy resulting from negotiations will be subject to consultation with affected populations through a referendum under the guarantee of the new Constitution's relevant provisions (El Ouali 2008: emphasis mine). This approach has initiated the process of territorial democracy cum autonomy in Sahara province. The region has started work from scratch to develop and move toward sustainable development while sharing power between the Center and local communities. The division of power and practices in the democratic system of governance marks popular sovereignty. It further

strengthens the idea of economic decentralization in which the provinces enjoy the autonomy to spend the finance for development in the true sense. However, this approach is not appropriate unless the communities concerned have both the capacity and the desire to form an independent central government and form independent regional governments. Sahara is working on it (Kumar 2013: emphasis mine).

Moroccan constitution enshrines advanced regionalization under Article 2 to redistribute the powers between constitutional institutions based on a democratic reorganization of powers between the State and the regions (The Constitution of Morocco 2011:4). The central and regional governments are each within a sphere, coordinated and independent, limiting the powers of both central and regional governments. It guarantees the Saharan demands for constitutional autonomy. Article 63 further explains the regionalization system in which ‘one-third of seats are elected through regional councils by direct suffrage’ (The Constitution of Morocco 2011:18). This was one of the significant demands of the Saharawis to have a right to elect the members of their Regional Councils. Article 36 says, ‘The principle of free administration assures the participation of the population concerned in the management of their affairs and favors their contribution to a complete and lasting human development’ (The Constitution of Morocco 2011:35). The self-management system in Sahara autonomous region works for regional planning, promotion of investment, trade, industry, power generation, transportation, tourism, and agriculture. Sahara’s self-management system will raise taxes, duties, and regional levies, work to explore natural resources, and build the self-sustained Sahara region. The Latin American trade block, comprising Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, has expressed its support for Morocco’s Autonomous Plan in Sahara province (Latin America 2020: emphasis mine).

Decentralization is based on the principle that the central government should coordinate and operate through the regional governments in some important matters (infrastructure development, house, education, health, employment, and social security). During the 75th session of the UN General Assembly’s Special Political and Decolonization (Fourth) Committee, Jordan supported Morocco’s position in Sahara province to find a mutually acceptable political solution (Jordan 2020: emphasis mine). The duly elected Head of Government needs to coordinate with the regional governments of the different regions, including Sahara, to strengthen development projects. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have expressed their support for Morocco’s territorial integrity. They also expressed trust before the UN General Assembly Fourth Committee concerning the Autonomous Plan and the UN-led processes to solve the lingering territorial dispute (Saudi and UAE 2020: emphasis mine).

The National Human Development Initiative (INDH) 2007 is designed to improve inclusiveness, accountability, and transparency of the decision-making and implementation processes at the local level to enhance the use of social and economic infrastructure and services by the poor and others vulnerable groups. ‘The program covers eradicating poverty in rural areas, social exclusion in urban areas,

the eradication of extreme vulnerability while also maintaining INDH governance mechanism and strengthening institutional capacity' (Arnold Guy 2009:81).

INDH works to fight against poverty alleviation, development of infrastructure, and socioeconomic development.

The most recent survey data that were publicly available for Morocco's MPI estimation refer to 2011. In Morocco, 18.6 percent of the population (6,636 thousand people) are multidimensionally poor, while an additional 13.2 percent are classified as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (4,700 thousand people). The breadth of deprivation (intensity) in Morocco, which is the average deprivation score experienced by people in multidimensional poverty, is 45.7 percent (Human Development Report 2019:6).

The poverty alleviation program under IDH shows affirmative implementation, and it will work for societal and economic development.

4 Drivers of Socioeconomic Development

Sahara province's natural resources consist mainly of phosphate deposits which are used for commercial fertilizer. However, it is valued particularly for its uranium content. The phosphate deposits were discovered in 1960 by the Spanish, and the Moroccan Government launched the mining. Phosphate revenue is one of the main reasons to attract other neighboring countries to Morocco. Sahara region's annual phosphate production is around two million metric tons only, and the reserves allow continuous and profitable mining for several more decades. According to the latest research and findings,

Southern Morocco is extremely rich in minerals, particularly in iron ore, uranium, titanium, natural gas, and oil. Some geologists say that vanadium is also abundant in this territory enough to consider its mining, which then would result in high profit. The Spanish found oil already in the 1960; however, they did not attempt to launch offshore drilling due to the underdevelopment of the area in economic terms (Janos 2009:17).

The phosphates sector contributes to positive growth (6% of RGDP) and employment. Apart from phosphates, mining prospects are potentially interesting. However, it needs more effort to explore the region's underground by both the government and private stakeholders, provided that the institutional framework is clarified. In parallel, transport is the sector that needs massive investment as part of the government's infrastructure development despite some persisting projects, such as the trunk road-I at Guelmim and the Dakhla Atlantic Port project. Air transport remains insufficient primarily and constitutes a handicap for the region and its development.

The author personally visited the southern coast of Tan-Tan province and found that about 1500 km of this coastal area is rich in the fishery and other marine resources. Fish industries having processing and packing facilities in the Tan-Tan province engage the local people to a limited extent. The southern coast needs to invite the industrial sectors having onsite processing capacity, the market valuation

of seafood, and refrigeration facilities of the fishmeal. The government should issue offshore fishing licenses and start the skill development program for the local youth in fishing and its marketing. There are several claims that this coast has a rich reserve of oil, hydrocarbon, and marine resources to strengthen the Moroccan Sahara economy. The source of renewable energy (of wind and solar) is rich in the southern coast, needs investment in generating the potential power, its connection to the national supply chain, and needs industrial training institutes of power to train the local youth.

Property and construction activities have become a feature of almost all the Saharan towns of Southern Morocco today.

This speculation in real estate, coupled with demographic growth and an especially high level of urbanization in the region (71.5 percent in 2004, compared to an average of 55.1 percent for Morocco), has also contributed to the appearance of areas of unregulated, informal, or precarious housing in some towns, such as Laayoune (McDougall and Scheele 2012:220).

The government should attract investment in the housing infrastructure and share the blueprints of the urban development plans.

Sahara province should attract the business environment with tax exemption, liberal rules on land grant policies, adopt single-window clearance for business investments, and transparent business policies to strengthen its economic goals. The government white paper trade policy will minimize the unstructured form of the economy dominated by the informal sectors and strengthen logistics services. In meetings with the different tribal groups of Sahara province, the author (S. Kumar) has been stunned to know that they incorporate rich traditions of art and craft, weaving, tapestry, leather goods, jewelry, food and drink culture. These ethno-cultural products can be globalized through proper training to the artisans. Providing an attractive market could promote the local people.

The territory has real potential in agriculture and livestock, practiced in the form of oasis, high added-value vegetable gardening, and camel breeding. Reportedly, southern provinces' 1.2% area is the utilizable agricultural area (UAA), and it is primarily located in the Guelmim-Es-Smara region. However, despite a diversified production, the agricultural sector's contribution to RGDP does not exceed 2% and contributes only 5–10% of employment (Green Morocco 2018). The main limiting factor in this sector is the challenge of mobilizing water resources. Livestock farming is predominant in the southern provinces. It involves camels, goats, sheep, and, to a lesser extent, cattle for milk production. Camel breeding has great potential for the development of youth employment in the region. However, it suffers from the absence of a valuation framework for the entire value chain, including developing rangelands, organizing breeders, encouraging downstream structured aggregators, modernizing and creating derivatives, and adapting distribution and marketing channels.

The territory is experiencing major water stress combined with minimal water resources. These limited resources (180 mm³ per year) are strongly dedicated to drinking water, 63% of the total consumption in the Saharan basin versus 4–9% elsewhere (CES 2020).

The limited water resource hinders the agricultural potential in Dakhla and Guelmim and over-pumping of water is a threat in protecting the deep groundwater. Insufficient exploration budget, the high cost of financing dams in Guelmim, and the constraints to setting up a desalination plant have arisen as the major hindrances.

The southern provinces have a rich natural and cultural heritage. The territory is located at the intersection of two significant cultures (Amazigh and Hassanya). It boasts a solid and unique cultural identity in Sahara. However, tourism's economic impact is still low, not exceeding 1.5% of RGDP and 2% of jobs (Tourism 2020). There are several constraints—poor promotion, lack of sufficient air connections, high air travel costs, and private entrepreneurs' timidity to develop niche products in Saharan oasis tourism by highlighting local cultural aspects. Large-scale projects can contribute to enhancing connectivity, such as the achievement of the South Atlantic harbor at Ntirift, north of Dakhla, and the upgrading of existing ports and facilities. The creation of a regional airline would allow air services targeting specific countries for tourism and export purposes. It is crucial to improve connections with the southern regions to promote their effective integration into the vast maritime economic area from the northern coast to West Africa and the Canary Islands.

The settlement is significant in the Sahara for the socioeconomic development of society. It will generate the fulfillment of basic needs of education, health, employment generation, and social security. Retail businesses come second (84 cases), and other property, including tele-boutiques (privately owned public telephone booths), third (53 cases), followed by cafes, transportation services, livestock herds, and travel agencies (James McDougall 2012:220). These are the parameters of the socioeconomic development and need to expand in the whole Sahara region. The Laayoune-Boujdour region is a diversified economic hub leveraging the region's strengths and assets in the development of the primary economic sector, e.g., fishery, camel industry, and agriculture. The development of an industrial center for the South phosphate processing as part of an integrated chemical complex may produce a wide range of fertilizers and construction materials. In the tertiary sector, trade and logistics platforms, niche craft, and tourism hubs may be the rational decision. The region will consolidate its position as an administrative center, evolving into a hub for the southern provinces and sub-Saharan Africa. The Oued Ed-Dahab-Lagouira region economic hub is having sectors of fisheries, agriculture with high added value, renewable energy, niche tourism, and logistics and trade. The region can potentially play a key role in terms of integration with sub-Saharan countries. The Guelmim-Es-Smara region's development could link the Kingdom's northern and southern parts. It will be based on the emergence of a vibrant, diversified social and agrarian-based economy (agriculture, livestock, crafts), responsible seaside tourism, oases, mountain ecotourism, and measures to catch up with human development and poverty eradication indicators.

The southern provinces boast assets, which can enable them to establish themselves as leaders in the production of renewable energy, 'particularly wind energy, in Dakhla, Tiskrad, Boujdour, Tarfaya, Akhfennir, and Laayoune, ensuring a 400 kva interconnection of Dakhla to the national grid, as a prelude to a connection with the Mauritanian network' (CES 2020).

5 Special Economic Development Drive

Moroccan Government's regional development model mandated for elaborating model to the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) in November 2012 and proposed development spanning between 10 and 15 years. The ESEC was formed for the development of Sahara province through boosting up the economic and social growth. The ESEC focuses on diverse aspects—fundamental rights and services, developing knowledge training and culture, preventing marginalization, supporting social and civil dialogue progress, protecting the environment, making strong governance and economic security, and promoting the private initiative and social democracy. The ESEC aims to promote the establishment of a regional economic system that stimulates growth, creates wealth, and generates jobs, especially for young people. It targets mobilizing all segments of society in the southern provinces, fostering their fulfillment and well-being, and promoting their integration while respecting their cultural specificities (Regional Development 2020).

The government has impressed the global market economy by appointing Mr. Chakib Benmoussa as the Head of the New Development Committee (NDC). NDC is designed to make practical contributions to the country's development perspective (MAPE, 20 November 2019: emphasis mine), principal of which are the followings:

- The NDC acts as an advisory body that works as a check and balance in the different economic development parameters. It focuses on the different ongoing economic reform programs in the different provinces in various sectors such as education, health, agriculture, investment, and taxation.
- The NDC is authorized to make the proposals to strengthen the effectiveness of the different development reforms in the country and submit its reports from time to time.
- The NDC objectively focuses on the competence and performance of the public and private sectors in the impartial services of the country's development. This model involves populations living in the recovered provinces and connecting them with their history and social ties.

5.1 Sports Investment in Sahara

Morocco in Africa has created several economic investment opportunities in all sectors and has become a favorite destination for investors. Moroccan vision of 31 million dirhams' sports projects is the new initiative to develop the Olympian skill training among the national and international sports players. These projects refer to building international swimming pool facilities under a green environment to enhance sports professionals' stamina and attract international investors to work

in this field. Morocco has already established good ties among chemical industries, pharmaceutical and renewable sector such as plastic recycling sector, fiber optic components manufacturing and automotive industry. Morocco today focuses on the building of international standard universities infrastructure, developing education and professionals along with the idea of developing world-class education hub (Renewable 2020: emphasis mine).

5.2 Bank Reforms for Rural Development

Morocco understands the backbone of economic development and focuses on its rural infrastructure investment. It has created several economic investment opportunities in all sectors. HM King Mohammed VI, in continuation of the investment-friendly environment, has announced the lowest interest rate of 2% on bank loans to the investment beneficiaries of the Integrated Program for Enterprise Support and Financing (SME Financing 2020). Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, the Bank Al-Maghrib, and the Groupement Professionnel des Banques du Maroc (GPBM) have coordinated this program. The scheme could be effective for the small- and medium-sized enterprises and young project holders who require a significant reduction in these rates to promote entrepreneurship, create employment, and gradually mark a shift in the mindset related to bank loans. The banking sector highlights that the scheme will further establish an unlimited refinancing mechanism. A preferential rate will increase the global market's guaranteed rate and maneuver the international investors in developing Morocco's rural infrastructure. In addition to it, HM King Mohammed VI has further strengthened the Hassan II Fund and announced the amount of 2 billion dirhams without interest rate for the development of entrepreneurship and financing sector in the rural areas. No doubt, it will promote the emergence of the rural middle class. It will further strengthen the rural development sector's investment opportunities irrespective of temporary weather vagaries and fluctuation in the agriculture goods price in the domestic and international market. These reforms will work in the current international market smoothly on the one hand and respecting the WTO guidelines on the development of the agricultural sector, including rural development on the other hand (MAPE, Bank Reforms, 29 January 2020: emphasis mine).

5.3 Social Development for Sahara Youth

Souss-Mussa borders the southeast of Tindouf province of Algeria. The youths of the Souss-Mussa region get a plethora of multi-cuisine activities under 'Argana' for listening and guidance, houses reception, entrepreneurship, employment and listening spaces, auditorium, workshops, media library, sports hall and mini football field of nearly 07 million dirhams, recently announced by His Majesty King

Mohammed VI. The budget of 18 million dirhams has been granted under the third phase (2019–2023) of the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) in the Souss-Moussa region. It aims to preserve the dignity of citizens and improve their living conditions and the development of human capital. The *Dar Momkin cultural space* of Lagouira and *Les etoiles du Souss* in the El Farah neighborhood focuses on 18–28 years youth in developing their new skills of reading, writing, theatre, music, and video activities. It needs a budget of another 6.7 dirhams under the INDH program. Similarly, *Les etoiles du Souss* enrolls 350 youngsters of 6–28 years old and offers different courses on theatre, plastic arts, dance, drama, music, and foreign languages. The inauguration of the prefecture of *Inezgane-AitMelloul* will improve young people's income and economic inclusion by providing a variety of tools in strengthening entrepreneurship and guaranteeing them better socioeconomic integration. 'This plan encourages the labor market, better job opportunities, and young business entrepreneurship not only to set up their business only but producing more employment opportunities for the local people in the region. The government has provided 28 mini-buses for school and sports transport' (MAPE, Youth, 13 February 2020: emphasis mine).

5.4 Women Empowerment in Sahara

The continuous women-centric systematic development program has been launched under the government's guidance. Consequently, the different sectors will nourish the holistic development of women in Morocco. The UNDP Sustainable Development Goals mention women empowerment and focuses on professional education, medical and engineering, technocrat, legal education, entrepreneurship, and political and economic empowerment. In the Africa Summit of 2018, the Moroccan monarch emphasized additional efforts to achieve gender equality across the continent. 'As a result, women today account for 11.8% of professionals that Morocco appointed to senior positions in public institutions between 2012 and first semester of 2020 as per the Human Resources in the 2021 Finance Bill' (Women empowerment 2020: emphasis mine).

The slogan of '*Equality to All*' in Morocco has been enshrined and practiced in the society, which has been clearly visible even during the Global Women's Forum 2020 in the USA. Her Highness Madam Ivana Trump has praised Morocco's efforts in strengthening women's empowerment and achieving the goals of SDG. Moroccan women's contribution in the global development process has been appreciated that will lead to real entrepreneurship in terms of employment generator and not employment seeker in the country and the world (MAPE, 18 February 2020: emphasis mine).

5.5 Diplomatic Development in Sahara

The government is extending the fraternity in the neighborhood countries. The Moroccan Government has opened the office of the Consulate General in Dakhla region on October 23, 2020. It connects the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Guinea Bissau, and Burkina Faso. The inauguration ceremony of these consulates was chaired by Mr. Nasser Bourita, Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans Abroad, and his counterparts Mr. Simeon Oyono Esono Angue of Equatorial Guinea, Mr. Suzi Carla Barbosa of Guinea Bissau, and Mr. Apha Barry of Burkina Faso. This connectivity builds rapid transactions in trade and commerce, encouraging tourism and people-to-people connectivity. It is noteworthy here to mention that the Moroccan Government has already started working from the newly inaugurated offices of the Consulate General in Gambia (January 7, 2020), the Republic of Djibouti (February 28, 2020), and the Republic of Liberia (March 12, 2020) for the development of North and South Corridor in general and development of Sahara region in particular (MAPE, Consulate, 24 October 2020: emphasis mine).

6 Post-Pandemic Development in Sahara

The good health of every citizen reflects the health of the country. It builds a healthy nation that produces good wealth and wise people. Morocco has successfully fought against the epidemic of COVID-19. His majesty underlines that the government, various public authorities, and health workers took stringent measures and hard resolutions to control the coronavirus and deserve a big thanks and note of appreciation. As a result, the country has protected the citizens and acted in the Nation's best interest. The royal family and all the citizens pay the indebtedness toward the role of medical and paramedical, civil and military executives, members of the Royal Armed Forces, Royal Gendarmerie, officials and auxiliaries of authority, components of the National Security, Auxiliary Forces, Civil Protection, all workers involved in the production and distribution of foodstuffs, and all those stood in the front line to fight against the pandemic.

Along with it, the people's spirited discipline and responsibility and civil society actors, working with a good spirit and a level of awareness during the lockdown period, provided mutual aid and voluntary services to the elders and needy families. It is noted that most of the production houses have been badly affected and need special treatment. His Majesty Mohammed VI has created a special fund to revive these sectors and has enabled 33 billion 700 million dirhams for it. The procurement of necessary medical equipment and the Central Guarantee Funds has enabled the country's economy getting recovered in the post-pandemic period (MAPE, Corona Virus, 30 July 2020: emphasis mine).

The government has focused on the health sector and future economic plans. As far as the health concerns of the Moroccan citizens, the government's thematic committee will act to reform this sector by collaborating with the private health sector in preserving the safety and good health of the people. The post-pandemic fund focuses on the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) in strengthening the health sector and other production units. This affirmative step is expected to generate employment opportunities and revive the different income sources. It should carry the benefit to more than 20,000 business units having the state-guaranteed loans amount to MAD 26.1 billion. This investment fund during the lockdown period is expected to strengthen various sectors such as Banking, Central Guarantee Fund, and Businesses and Professional Associations and strengthen public-private partnership (PPP) projects and promote the recovery plans. This fund is expected further to restructure the industry, innovation, high-potential sectors, SME, infrastructure, agriculture, tourism, and others. The government's Action Program will review the appointment of senior officials and encourage the competent officials to improve the performance of state assets, work for good governance, and put forward their accountability. This transparency in the functioning of all accountable officials could deliver the desired result. It will strengthen the well-being of the people's development and work for national unity and social solidarity (MAPE, Parliament Session, 10 October 2020: emphasis mine).

7 Conclusion

Morocco has joined the African Union on January 31, 2017, with the overwhelming support of the member states. African Union (AU), in its last meeting held on July 1, 2018, explained that the organization has complete faith in the functioning of the United Nations dealing with the Moroccan Sahara issue. AU is not convinced to draw a parallel process in the Moroccan Sahara issue and will strengthen the efforts of the UN in the management of the issue of the Moroccan Sahara. The AU report further explained and justified their support to the UN in resolving it, and the creation of parallel proceedings will lead to chaos and confusion only. AU supports the resolutions of the UN Security Council dealing with the Moroccan Sahara. It is the only mechanism to support the UN and respect the UN's mandate.

Morocco has shown its keen interests in the continent's socioeconomic developments and revised its constitution in the year 2011. The regional developmental approach refers to political democracy, economic development for the society, and social cohesion keenly working under the global village approach. The self-management system in Sahara autonomous region has worked wonderfully in promoting investment, trade, industry, power generation, transportation, tourism, and agriculture. The self-management system in Sahara has raised the taxes, duties, and regional levies and is working for the exploration of natural resources in the building of the self-sustained Sahara region since 2011.

They will have, for this purpose, financial resources, appropriate and adequate for the development of the region. These financial resources collect from local taxes, contributions and other territorial revenues. The (exploitation of natural resources and heritage of the region as well as grants from the state fund inter-regional units of governance and promote solidarity” (Arnold Guy 2009: emphasis mine).

Today, the unresolved issue of the Sahara, propagated by the neighboring State, has become a block in supporting the idea of the global village of Morocco and fuels the regionalism in the African continent, hampering the peace and security in the region.

Along with it, Article XI of the Constitution of Morocco supports the idea of the global village and enshrines to develop all the regions of Morocco and establish peace and security. This peace and security will attract global investors to contribute to the development of infrastructure, telecommunication, transportation, power generation, mining, housing, education, health, and other projects in the undeveloped region of Sahara. The idea of self-management (Section 35) by the regional governments is a step to attract global investors and sign the agreements for different development projects. This scheme will support all the regions, including Sahara. This approach will connect Sahara and other regions of Morocco with the world nations and move toward international integration. The autonomous regionalization would guarantee the best future for the Sahara, strengthening Maghreb’s idea of peace, unity, integration, and sustainable development.

Overall, according to the principles of democratic procedures, populations of the Sahara autonomous region will act through legislative, executive, and judicial authorities within the region and have broad skills, particularly in the economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects. They will have, for this purpose, financial resources appropriate and adequate for the development of the region. These resources could be arranged from local taxes, contributions, and other territorial revenues. The Sahara autonomous region’s population should be represented in the national parliament and other national institutions, and they should participate in all national elections. The statute of autonomy resulting from negotiations will be subject to consultation with affected populations through a referendum under the guarantee of the new Constitution’s relevant provisions.

Sahara province has become one of the favourite destinations for investors with creating several economic investment opportunities in all sectors. With 16 international airports, two shoreline ports, and 38 ports, of which thirteen are dedicated to foreign trade, the development of urban infrastructure in terms of highways, high-speed trains, and 4G network connectivity has been proliferating. The Industrial Acceleration Plan (IAP) 2014–2020 of Morocco has drawn up a road map to create 500,000 jobs in the industry, of which half of them would be through foreign investment (IAP 2018). The IAP is the cornerstone of the Industrial Cluster Strategy, and developing clusters is a key to modernize and integrate each industry under this plan. The government has adopted supportive measures and announced the industrial fund of 20 billion MAD, allotted 1000 ha of land exclusively for industrial development, having dedicated financial products, coordinated training programs, and developing import substitution. The IAP strategy is to raise 23% of

the GDP share in the industry for value addition (Kumar 2019:18). The IAP's cross-functional aims are to rebalance the trade accounts by prompting exports and substituting local sourcing for imports, including the informal economy, and work for inclusive development. Morocco has made tremendous strides in chemical industries, pharmaceutical, renewable sectors such as the plastic recycling sector, fiber optic components manufacturing, and automotive industry, along with the export of phosphate used in the agriculture fertilizer. It is today focusing on the building of international standard universities and developing a world-class education hub. Besides, the IAP focuses on the agriculture sector under Green Morocco Plan, tourism under 2020, mining sector, liquefied natural gas, IT plan under 2025, renewable energy plan, and Logistics Plan under 2030 (The Green Moroccan Plan 2018). The foreign economic policy of Morocco, under globalization, has adopted a rational and pragmatic approach of openness in trade and commerce. This openness will meet the needs of young people in terms of work, employability, and better social life. On the other hand, it will generate abundant opportunities in the digital industry, renewable energy, health, tourism, and the automotive industry.

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