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# De-Peripheralizing Morocco's East in the Face of Climate Change and Border Securitization

Yasmine Zarhloule



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## Summary

The closure of the border between Morocco and Algeria disrupted smuggling networks in the former's Eastern Region. Moroccan authorities have since striven to develop local infrastructure and create alternative employment there. While these initiatives have maintained stability, the challenges posed by climate change, particularly water scarcity, remain. This underscores the need for Morocco to more thoroughly integrate climate-change adaptation strategies into local and regional planning, while also embracing and protecting indigenous ancestral socioeconomic systems.

## Key Themes

- Long neglected, the communities of Morocco's Eastern Region, which borders Algeria, relied on smuggling to stay afloat.
- A key reason behind border securitization since 1994, and particularly 2015, was geopolitical tension and rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, leading the latter to focus on cooperation with other African countries.
- In recent years, Morocco has been significantly affected by a lack of precipitation, a trend that is pronounced across North Africa. This poses a major challenge, given the critical role of the agricultural sector in economic prosperity and employment-creation.
- The Eastern Region, characterized by an arid and semi-arid climate, has been hard hit by climate change, particularly water scarcity. This has complicated the adaptation strategies implemented following the border closure.

## Findings

- The securitization and ultimate closure of the border transformed the socioeconomic fabric of Morocco's Eastern Region and increased popular disaffection. This led the authorities to develop the area's infrastructure—transportation, health centers, and electricity networks—and provide borderland populations with alternative employment through industrial projects and community-based cooperatives.
- The lack of cooperation around resource management between Algeria and Morocco has led the latter to launch initiatives that are national in scope, but also to work with sub-Saharan African countries to strengthen region-to-region ties. These efforts are supported by international organizations and NGOs.
- Morocco has taken a proactive approach to tackling and mitigating the impact of climate change, elaborating several sector-specific strategies and national adaptation plans around key sectors such as agriculture and water management. Future regional and local municipal development plans must be comprehensively anchored in these strategies while maintaining the specificities of the Eastern Region's social, economic, and ecological systems.
- The Eastern Region's cooperatives, which have increasingly gained traction, must be strengthened both structurally and in terms of capacity. Simultaneously, local ancestral knowledge, such as that governing the water management systems known as *khattaras*, should be tapped into, as it provides innovative homegrown solutions that complement macro-scale initiatives such as desalination.



## Introduction

In recent years, two very different yet equally harmful developments have threatened the socioeconomic fabric of Morocco's Eastern Region—also known as the Oriental Region—a long-marginalized rural and agricultural part of the country that borders Algeria. Increasingly stringent border security measures by both Morocco and Algeria drastically curtailed smuggling, on which many eastern Moroccans relied to make a living. And the ever-harsher effects of climate change have led to a lack of water, which is vital for agriculture. The fear among Moroccan officialdom was that, in this far-flung and historically neglected region whose stability has always been a tenuous affair, the militarization of the border and the ravages of climate change would generate unrest, accelerate a rural exodus, and place enormous strain on the cities to which internal migrants flock.

The authorities—both local and central—responded by ratcheting up two campaigns that were already in operation. The first was a drive to bolster the region's infrastructure and its reach, as well as provide basic services to its inhabitants. This included specific initiatives to combat the shortage of water, such as constructing dams and desalination plants as well as encouraging farmers to switch from heavily water-reliant crops to olive and almond trees, which require less irrigation. The second campaign was to facilitate and broaden the work of community-based cooperatives. These are collaborative outfits that seek to stimulate small-scale farming and other agricultural activities, often by involving women and youth.

In the foreign policy arena, Rabat has embarked on a reorientation intended to forge stronger ties with sub-Saharan African countries. This strategy, which is predicated on the notion that developing countries face similar challenges, has begun to have a positive effect on the country's historically underserved regions, including the east and its borderlands. In particular, decentralized cooperation in the form of various plans for sustainable development in Morocco's east and in neighboring countries is beginning to gain traction. More such initiatives can be expected in the future.

## Morocco's Economically Marginalized Eastern Borderlands

The drawing of the border between Morocco and Algeria took place during the colonial period, when both countries were under French rule. Morocco attained independence in 1956 and Algeria followed in 1962. Two post-independence conflicts—the Sand War of 1963 and the Western Sahara conflict of 1975—followed by seemingly ever-rising tensions culminated in the closure of Moroccan-Algerian border crossings in 1994. Official crossings aside, however, the border remained porous, allowing for continued interaction between area residents, many of whose familial and commercial ties span both countries. It is only in the past decade that the situation has changed. The imposition of walling and fencing has essentially severed eastern Moroccans from western Algerians.

In 2013, in an effort to curb gasoline smuggling into Morocco, Algerian authorities dug 170 kilometers of trenches along the border, mostly in the province of Tlemcen.<sup>1</sup> The next year, both Algeria and Morocco built fences and dug trenches along parts of the border.<sup>2</sup> And in 2015, Algeria started widening and deepening the trenches to make cross-border movement more difficult.<sup>3</sup> The following year, Morocco added concertina wires, electronic system controls, and a fortified wall along part of the border. And the same year, Moroccan authorities extended the fence to the town of Figuig—farther along the international boundary.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, Rabat announced that it planned to establish a closed military zone along the entirety of its 1,559 kilometer border with Algeria.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons for such moves are seldom fully elucidated, but state officials often cite a general concern over instability, including fears over transnational threats such as terrorism, illegal migration, and smuggling.<sup>6</sup> For example, addressing measures Morocco was taking on its borders in 2016, Moroccan ambassador to the United Nations Omar Hilale stated that his country “sacrifices enormous human resources to fight against criminal networks of smuggling, contraband, and trafficking of all kinds” with the aim of “ensuring surveillance and control of the kingdom’s borders and coastlines.”<sup>7</sup>

The reference to smuggling was telling. Informal economies, especially in borderlands, are often a stabilizing element in regions that are geographically and materially far-removed from the central state and its investments, and have little infrastructure. This is very much the case in Morocco. A 2004 report by the Eastern Region Chamber of Commerce estimated that the informal economic sector generated the equivalent of approximately \$590 million per year. Gasoline, most of which came from Algeria, where it is subsidized by the government, accounted for the bulk of smuggled goods, reaching a volume of 527,000 liters per day.<sup>8</sup> Given that the Eastern Region’s unemployment rate has long been disproportionately high—in 2023, it stood at 19.6 percent, whereas the national average was 13 percent—smuggling had helped to keep thousands of families afloat.<sup>9</sup>

Morocco's Eastern Region, one of twelve officially designated regions that make up the country, is located far from the three urban economic centers of Casablanca-Settat, Tangier-Tetouan-Hoceima, and Rabat-Sale-Kenitra. Together, these three conurbations generated 58 percent of overall national wealth in 2019. The Eastern Region, on the other hand, contributed 5.1 percent to the gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>10</sup> In light of this and other disparities, as well as geographical distance, the Eastern Region has long languished on the periphery of Moroccan economic life. Growing border securitization after 1994 exacerbated its peripherality—particularly with the erection over the past decade of walls and fences, which have curtailed cross-border contact, including smuggling.

As it happens, this border securitization took place at a time of growing disaffection among the inhabitants of several provinces in Morocco's Eastern Region. In 2017, following the death of a smuggler who had crossed the closed border, enraged locals rioted in the streets of Bni Drar, his hometown. They blocked access to the roads and damaged property and cars.<sup>11</sup> From 2016 to mid-2017, protests in the Rif area broke out, as part of what came to be dubbed the HIRAK, a nationwide protest movement, and in 2018 demonstrations took place in the province of Jerada.<sup>12</sup> Though originating in their respective historical and local contexts, the protests in Jerada and the Rif revolved around three key demands: an amelioration of socioeconomic conditions; the provision of basic infrastructure; and an employment drive, especially for the youth. This served to highlight the shared grievances of Morocco's eastern provinces.

The disturbances also unsettled the government and spurred it to redouble its efforts to ameliorate the plight of the east. To maintain stability in this increasingly restive part of the country, Rabat as well as regional authorities ramped up a strategy they had originated in 2003 and that they began to implement more assiduously following the negative effects of border-tightening measures between 2013 and 2016: providing basic services, opening schools and health centers, securing alternative employment for locals, and increasing the region's infrastructural capacity. More and more borderlands were connected to the national electricity grid as well as provided with access to drinking water and sanitization.<sup>13</sup> In Jerada, following the protests of 2017-2018, regional authorities announced the creation of 108 projects covering water, electricity, and education for the period 2018–2023, with a total cost of approximately \$50 million.<sup>14</sup>

The securing of alternative employment tended to follow two formats. The first was assisting locals in creating or reviving small enterprises. The second was building infrastructure cluster zones, such as the Technopole and the Agropole, to enable the integration of related businesses. (The Technopole and the Agropole revolve around technology/industry and agriculture, respectively).<sup>15</sup> As it happens, plans for stabilizing the Eastern Region economically have often rested on exploiting its infrastructural capacity. Megaprojects such as the Nador West Med Port, a shipping port undergoing construction in Morocco's northeast, remain key to disenclaving the region, attracting foreign investment, and driving up employment.<sup>16</sup>

Although the protests in Jerada and the Rif proved serendipitous for the inhabitants of the borderlands, in that they prompted the government to launch development projects in the Eastern Region as a whole, it was clear that its rural areas would require special attention. This was because of a phenomenon unrelated to border securitization: climate change. To be sure, the effects of the Earth's changing climate are increasingly felt across the length and breadth of Morocco, with disruption caused by rising sea levels along the northern coast and irregular precipitation in the east and south of the country. However, it is in the rural east, where most people earn their living through subsistence farming, that the problem has been most acute. The risk is that, together, border securitization and climate change will permanently alter the region for the worse.

## Grappling with Climate Change in Morocco

The major climate-related threat in Morocco is insufficient precipitation. This results in water scarcity, creating a domino-effect that upends all manner of agricultural activity and in time threatens the fabric of social life. Admittedly, water scarcity is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s, rainfall in Morocco's east was so limited that the Regional Agricultural Development Office, the government body responsible for the development of agriculture and the professional training of farmers, declared a drought. However, the problem may be worsening.<sup>17</sup> In 2023, the General Directorate of Meteorology announced a rainfall deficit of 48 percent, making it the driest year in eight decades.<sup>18</sup> The following summer, national news outlets reported dangerously low levels of water in Morocco's dams.<sup>19</sup> People across the country—including the major cities of Casablanca and Tangier—experienced water cuts and recurrent closures of public baths.<sup>20</sup>

Rabat has put forth several plans to mitigate the severity of climate change. This has not gone unrecognized. For example, in 2024, Morocco was ranked ninth on the Climate Change Performance Index, an independent standardized monitoring tool employed by German non-governmental organization Germanwatch e.V., to assess countries' climate mitigation performance.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to water scarcity in particular, two initiatives deserve mention. Between 2005 and 2019, the Green Morocco Plan (GMP) sought to strengthen the competition of the agricultural sector in vulnerable areas by incentivizing farmers to switch to drought-tolerant crops, crop rotation, and irrigation techniques that use less water.<sup>22</sup> The Generation Green Strategy, prolaunched in 2020 and meant to last until 2030, complements the earlier plan's focus on agricultural competition, with a focus on human development through strengthening local agricultural production and diversifying employment in the agricultural sector.<sup>23</sup>

The other relevant project the government has undertaken is to revitalize agricultural and other cooperatives for the purpose of stimulating economic development. This is especially important in the east, where agriculture reigns supreme. Indeed, though the Eastern Region

is only the third most impacted by water scarcity in the country, it suffers disproportionately from the phenomenon due to its reliance on agriculture and a climate classified as falling between arid and semi-arid. Cooperatives were first established in 1937, when Morocco was still a French protectorate, and have remained in operation since.<sup>24</sup> However, in 2005, the Initiative of National Human Development (INDH), a government body dedicated to curbing poverty, sought to broaden the format and the accessibility of cooperatives. The INDH focused on agriculture, crafts, and commerce, and aimed its efforts mostly at women and the youth. Its efforts bore fruit almost immediately, with the number of cooperatives soaring from 4,895 in 2005 to 60,000 in 2023.<sup>25</sup>

## The Scourge of Water Scarcity

The main impact of Morocco's lack of sufficient water is felt in the agricultural sector, which accounts for approximately 15 percent of the country's GDP and 23 percent of its exports.<sup>26</sup> As of 2019, the agricultural sector was responsible for 69 percent of rural employment and 39 percent of jobs in the country, with agribusiness alone employing approximately 140,000 people.<sup>27</sup> In the six provinces and two prefectures that make up the heavily agricultural Eastern Region, just over 23 percent of the population worked in the sector as of 2021.<sup>28</sup> Here, water scarcity and rising temperatures have exacerbated the situation of locals already suffering from the border closure. Alongside the few large and medium-sized farms that grow citrus fruits for export to European markets, there are small family farms that grow cereals and legumes. Given limited adaptation strategies, these holdings are the most affected by climate change. Their lack of financial stability and poor integration into formal institutions and markets limits their owners' prospects for formally owning land, obtaining bank loans, and acquiring the permits need for digging water wells.<sup>29</sup>

The northern portion of the Eastern Region is important for arable farming as well as livestock-rearing. In this area, climate change has hit cattle-breeding operations particularly hard. In 2020–2021, due in large part to droughts and the COVID-19 pandemic, cattle feed prices increased between 30 and 40 percent.<sup>30</sup> This meant that farmers struggled to keep their livestock. Driven to despair, many sold their animals to slaughterhouses and turned to alternative employment. The combination of droughts and the pandemic is likely to have caused the fluctuation in the price of milk and derivatives in the country during that period. In 2023, a project was launched in Figuig to protect livestock through the distribution of cattle feed.<sup>31</sup>

Starting in 2010, and in line with the GMP, regional and local authorities encouraged farmers to switch from relying on water-needy crops to cultivating olive and almond trees, which require less irrigation. To support the change, they offered training sessions in sustainable farming and agricultural practices. The undertaking met with some success. In 2017, almond cultivation in the Eastern Region accounted for 33 percent of agricultural land, in comparison to 28 percent in 2008.<sup>32</sup> The region represented 15 percent of national

almond production in 2018, making it the second in terms of almond production in the country.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the hydro-climatic context of the region is such that annual almond production continues to fall below the expected average of 2 kilograms per tree.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from pastoral farming, the inhabitants of Figuig have historically relied on date cultivation for their livelihoods. Equipped with a centuries-old underground irrigation system known as *khattaras*, the community in Figuig channeled underground water to the surface before distributing it through a network of canals to basins for collection. Water rights were based on custom and need. In recent years, however, these methods fell short of what was required to overcome the increasing problem of water scarcity, and the output of dates declined.<sup>35</sup> This was alarming not only because dates are an integral part of Figuig's economy, but also because date farmers in Arja, another border town in the Eastern Region, were expelled from their lands by the Algerian military in 2021 following tensions with Morocco and both countries' putting in place greater security measures in their border areas.<sup>36</sup> With date cultivation slumping in Figuig due to climate change and in Arja due to border securitization, Morocco's production of the crop as a whole was threatened.

Two dams were built to improve water supply to Figuig—the first in 2012 and the second in 2016.<sup>37</sup> In 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture announced that both dams would be connected to the water supply network, benefiting more than 1,360 farmers in Figuig.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in April 2024, the Regional Council of the Eastern Region signed an agreement for the construction of eight brack water desalination plants in the provinces of Driouech, Figuig, Guercif, Jerada, and Nador, as well as the connection of three seawater desalination plants to water and electricity networks in Nador and Berkane.<sup>39</sup> A budget of approximately \$10 million was allocated for these projects, which are part of an emergency program for the construction of desalination units at the national level.

This reflected a nationwide endeavor. Water desalination is vital to bolstering water security throughout the kingdom. On the occasion of French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit to Morocco in October 2024, a memorandum of agreement was signed with the French company Veolia for the development of a seawater desalination plant that will supply drinking water to regions impacted by droughts. Forecasted to be the largest in Africa, and the second largest in the world, the plant is intended to meet the water needs of 9.3 million citizens.<sup>40</sup>

All these measures highlight efforts, both at the regional and the local level, to combat the threat of water scarcity, particularly its effects on rural livelihoods in Morocco. Indeed, the promotion of sustainable farming practices as part of national programs such as GMP, along with the construction of dams and water desalination plants, is crucial for preserving the viability of agriculture—and by extension the communities that depend on it for their survival. Increasingly, such measures are complemented by the work of agricultural and other cooperatives.

## Reviving Cooperatives in Morocco's East

Cooperatives in Morocco are small, community-based mutual assistance enterprises that have a long history, but that have recently taken on added importance. Their historical role in various parts of the country, including the east, and the more recent success stories of those that came into existence following the INDH's facilitative measures in 2005, meant that cooperatives were perceived favorably by officialdom. Regional authorities as well as the central government in Rabat considered them credible mechanisms to address unemployment ensuing from the border closure, which had disrupted smuggling networks, and reduce the harm of climate change, which was impinging on agricultural output. Following passage of a law in 2014 that further expedited their licensing and operation, some 750 cooperatives, most of them agricultural in nature, were established in the eastern border region between 2016 and 2019.<sup>41</sup> In fact, when it comes to initiatives launched to deal with the pitfalls of closure and the effects of climate change in the Eastern Region, the majority of those that proved to be revenue-generating were cooperatives.

Cooperatives have proven particularly effective in regions that preserved other local forms of socioeconomic solidarity. Indeed, where indigenous forms of organization were already in place, they facilitated the absorption of cooperatives into the socioeconomic fabric. Local and indigenous forms of organization are encompassed in the concept of *musharaka*—an association contract between two or more parties to fund an initiative or project in which the profits are divided between the parties involved. Social practices prioritize solidarity as a means of economic empowerment throughout the country, with *touiza* and *jmaa* being key practices.

The *touiza*, an Amazigh term for helping, is a social practice mostly present in rural communities. When faced with hurdles such as disease, for example, a farmer unable to work can rely on the community to organize a *touiza*, whereby other farmers would collectively farm and harvest his land.<sup>42</sup> This also applied to other activities, such as the building of wells, water systems, and private roads, and benefits individuals with limited financial resources to pay for labor. The *jmaa*, on the other hand, is an assembly of tribal or village leaders aiming to preserve social relations and resource production. The *jmaa* resolves conflicts, manages common interests, and even pools people and resources together for the purpose of social development projects.<sup>43</sup>

Spurred by the border closure and climate change, the revival of the cooperative sector in the Eastern Region was enabled by a new law. Instituted in 2014, Law 112-12 simplified the requirements and eligibility criteria for the formation of cooperatives.<sup>44</sup> This led to their proliferation. By 2020, cooperatives in the country's Eastern Region numbered 5,517 and employed 79,602 people.<sup>45</sup> According to the Office of Cooperation Development (ODCO), which encourages and tracks the work of cooperatives, agriculture in 2022 accounted for 65 percent of cooperatives nationally.<sup>46</sup> In the east, this includes, for example, the production of rosemary, honey, almonds, and olive oil, as well as cattle breeding. Most cooperatives fall under the scope of the INDH.



Funding for cooperatives in the region comes from international agencies such as Enabel, the Belgian Development Agency, the French Development Agency, and the United Nations Development Program (through the Integrated Local Development Program for the Eastern Region, also known as DÉLIO).<sup>47</sup> The funds are distributed according to each locality's climate and topography. Jerada, for example, received approximately \$590,000 in financing for honey and almond production, while in Berkane, cattle breeding and meat production endeavors were allocated \$300,000.<sup>48</sup>

More recently, state-run initiatives such as the *murafaqa* and *intilaqa* programs have become involved in the management and funding of cooperatives. *Intilaqa*, or launching, is a funding program for entrepreneurs and start-ups that offers low interest rates. *Murafaqa*, or accompaniment, is focused specifically on cooperatives. It was announced in 2010 and officially launched in 2014. With a budget of approximately \$8 million, the program sought to strengthen the capacity of cooperatives in terms of management, governance, and market access.<sup>49</sup> This was part of a broader government strategy to increase the GDP contribution of the social and solidarity sector. It appears to have worked: the GDP contribution went from 1.6 percent in 2010 to 3.9 percent in 2020.<sup>50</sup>

Women and the youth are particularly encouraged to take part in these initiatives.<sup>51</sup> For example, in 2021, the Ministry of Tourism, Crafts, and Social and Solidarity Economy, along with the ODCO, announced the launch of the Lalla Moutaaouina Prize. The national award recognizes the most innovative initiatives for the development of women's cooperatives projects and is part of a longer commitment to highlighting women's contribution to the sector.<sup>52</sup> In the Eastern Region, women accounted for 39 percent of all cooperative members in 2019.<sup>53</sup>

Yet although local and regional authorities have met with success, small protests recurrently take place throughout the region. In Arja, for example, there was a call in 2021 for the compensation of farmers who lost their lands when Algerian soldiers expelled them from the area. This protest sent a strong message to local authorities and the state more generally that borderlands are not pawns in interstate rivalries.<sup>54</sup> Women were also active participants in marches and boycotts in light of claims of privatization of water resources in the locality in 2023.<sup>55</sup> In the city of Oujda, the local branch of the Social Front—a movement grouping leftist parties and trade unions—organized a sit-in to protest skyrocketing fuel prices.<sup>56</sup>

Ultimately, although grievances in the borderlands, particularly over economic marginalization, continue to simmer, cooperatives have emerged as essential to providing alternative employment for communities that had long relied on the border for survival. They also have a political salience, in that they serve to smooth over an often historically strained relationship between the state and its citizens, thereby reducing chances that friction will escalate into confrontation. For the past decade, this has contributed to maintaining stability and also to limiting the exodus of borderland populations to urban centers. Cooperatives have thus gone from acting as stabilizing instruments to becoming the *badil*, the alternative, to rural flight—and one that takes the form of an endeavor that is firmly embedded in the economic fabric of the region.



## The Need for, and Limits of, Regional Cooperation

To tackle climate change in border areas, international organizations frequently advocate cross-border cooperation. That is because populations on either immediate side of an international boundary, however long-established, often share a culture and language as well as specific social and economic needs, particularly when they are located far from the economic centers of the country. The regional fragmentation between the countries of the Maghreb hampers their ability to collaborate. This is especially true of Morocco and Algeria, given their rivalry. The failure of the two countries to coordinate use of the shared Bounaim-Taffna water basin, for example, has led to its overexploitation and contamination by both sides. However, in cultivating links with African countries farther afield, Morocco has sought to capitalize on alternatives, in line with what it terms South-South cooperation.<sup>57</sup>

At the regional level, initiatives for cross-border projects have gained ground, often in the form of cooperatives as well as plans for sustainable development. In 2022, the Forum of African Regions organized its first meeting in Saidia—in Morocco’s east—where state officials from countries including Cameroon, South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria highlighted the role of specific regions as poles for sustainable development on the continent.<sup>58</sup> The forum focused on defining the role of regional actors and decentralizing systems of governance in tackling the challenges of climate change, fostering South-South collaboration, and elaborating a roadmap to achieve the objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Agenda 2063 plans, which call for inclusive and economic sustainable growth as well as eradicating poverty and combating climate change. This first meeting culminated in the signing of the Saidia Convention, which outlined the various regions’ importance and called on national governments and global partners to provide them with financial assistance.<sup>59</sup>

In partnership with local and regional actors, Echos Communication, a Belgian non-governmental organization dedicated to improving the lot of underprivileged families launched two initiatives with the Senegalese border region of Kaolack. The first was territorial coaching centers—the first of their kind on the continent.<sup>60</sup> Touted by its advocates as an innovative approach to decentralized cooperation, territorial coaching aims to strengthen links between holders of elected office across countries to better address shared challenges. It provides coaching in sector-specific skills. In Kaolack, this was undertaken for cooperatives working on agricultural production and those involved in artisanal salt production, as well as in the form of a complementary program on attaining gender equality.<sup>61</sup>

Kindred projects were launched with the regions of Nawa in Ivory Coast and Boucle du Mohoun in Burkina Faso. Nawa and Morocco’s Eastern Region signed an agreement in 2018 to reinforce bilateral cooperation on local development, territorial coaching, gender parity, and more.<sup>62</sup> Exchanges of students, cooperatives, and territorial coaches have since

been facilitated through this partnership. With Boucle du Mohoun, similar activities took place, with the focus on attaining gender equality in cooperatives and strengthening capacity-building in local civil society. Both the Nawa and Boucle du Mohoun projects were undertaken with the backing of Echos Communication.

These moves reflect the foreign policy Morocco has pursued since 2011—specifically, South-South cooperation.<sup>63</sup> The strategy has sought to deepen integration and cooperation with a number of sub-Saharan African countries, particularly through the kingdom's investment in their banking, infrastructural, telecommunications, and agricultural sectors. In 2021, foreign direct investments by Morocco reached over \$800 million, making it the second largest African investor on the continent and the largest in West Africa.<sup>64</sup> The institutions doing the investing include BMCE Bank of Africa (Morocco's largest bank), telecommunications company Maroc Telecom, real estate developer Addoha, and pharmaceutical company Cooper Pharma.<sup>65</sup> And, in 2017, following an absence of over three decades, Morocco rejoined the African Union.<sup>66</sup>

However, holistically integrating climate-change risks and adaptation strategies into regional development planning has yet to occur. In fact, the sector-specific approach, while traditionally preferred for its perceived efficiency, has at times gone to extremes. For example, initial strategies (including those of the GMP) to promote sustainable development and address the negative impact of climate change were siloed in single-subject action plans for agriculture, water, or energy. Additionally, several reports restricted their analysis to highly localized ecosystems,<sup>67</sup> such as forests, oases, and coastal zones. All this ran the risk of hampering collaborative approaches, particularly across different local and regional contexts.

Yet there are signs that a new approach is afoot. In 2022, Morocco released its National Adaptation Plan 2022–2030, which links together all sectoral plans devised prior to it and provides a national roadmap for relevant institutions.<sup>68</sup> It also acknowledges the need for a separate plan for cities, one that addresses climate change challenges when it comes to urbanism—including habitation and transportation. Additionally, there is the most recent iteration of the Regional Development Plan for the East, which was released in 2018. Acknowledging the risks of climate change and the particularity of the region, this version identifies several areas for improvement, including the integrated management of water resources, the preservation of environmental patrimony, and the promotion of a green circular economy.<sup>69</sup> The plan also assesses the Eastern Region's ability to more effectively apply initiatives that are already in force, such as the National Climate Plan, and adapt them where necessary. In particular, it factors into its analysis the interdependence of social and economic development.

More of this approach is needed. Further integrating climate-related adaptation strategies into regional planning would enhance the alignment between national strategies and sectoral approaches. This integration would enable the identification and implementation of innovative bottom-up solutions to address climate change and its impact on border regions, while establishing clear reference points for policy at the regional, provincial, and municipal

levels. The role of cooperatives in this is not to be underestimated, as they can serve as stabilizing forces in otherwise fragile communities and become essential contributors to regional development. Their strengthening, structurally and in terms of capacity, can offer pathways for Morocco to address the social and economic challenges of climate change, particularly in the agricultural sector and in water management. In this context, leveraging local ancestral knowledge such as the *khettaras* in arid areas such as Figuig can complement macro-scale policies, including desalination initiatives.

## Conclusion

Relief for the inhabitants of Morocco's beleaguered eastern borderlands came not a moment too soon. Without the authorities' rigorous push to expand the role and scope of agricultural cooperatives, and without their enhanced efforts to combat water scarcity, those living in the country's east would have experienced even greater difficulty withstanding the ravages of climate change and border securitization. Yet this is not to say that the threat has passed. The economic and social stability of Morocco's east remains fragile and subject to disruption.

Arguably the most important factor at play is the projected permanence of climate change—and its negative consequences. For all its improbability in the immediate future, given that tensions between Morocco and Algeria show no sign of abating, border securitization can be reversed. Conversely, the conventional wisdom is that, at best, it is possible only to arrest the continued deterioration of the Earth's climate. A region severely afflicted by the phenomenon will require a sustained expenditure of resources to remain agriculturally productive—let alone profitable—or ultimately even habitable. Such is the case with Morocco's east. This makes it more likely than not that ensuring the socioeconomic viability of the country's eastern borderlands, whether through localized initiatives or collaborative projects with other African states facing similar challenges, will take the form of a continuous race against climate change.



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## About the Author

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## Notes

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