





## **Foreign Funding, Local Associations, and Environmental Resilience in Oasis Areas: A Case Study of Tata Oasis, Morocco**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes how local associations combat environmental degradation and fragility exacerbated by climate change, and the resulting impacts on social and economic stability. The analysis draws on field data from a Moroccan context marked by environmental fragility, social marginalization, and the increasing effects of climate change on living conditions and stability. The Tata oasis, located in southeastern Morocco, represents a model of fragile and sensitive local environments. The environment of this region is similar to many environments in North African countries, which witness the presence of dry and semidry areas close to the desert climate, which often form oases areas, characterized by the development of mechanisms for adapting to harsh environmental conditions by resisting various environmental, political, colonial, and social risks. Marginalization is not a new issue in these communities, but new issues include lifestyle changes, increasing needs, demographic growth, and the desire for better living conditions. These areas are still developing resistance mechanisms following the intervention of governmental institutions, local authorities, and prominent international organizations that provide financial and technical support. Overall, this research reveals the resistance mechanisms of the new generation of local civic organizations and how young people continue to create innovative

interventions and lead local organizations in search of survival in the face of environmental and social challenges. Then we examine how national and international governmental and non-governmental institutions that have become intensively involved in these areas since the 1980s affect them, and are these efforts really on the right path toward resisting these contemporary challenges?

### Keywords

Foreign Funding, Local Associations, Social Capital, Donor Dependency, Environmental Fragility

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## Yabancı Fonlar, Yerel Dernekler ve Vaha Alanlarında Çevresel Dayanıklılık: Fas-Tata Vahası Örneği

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### Öz

Bu makale, yerel derneklerin iklim değişikliğiyle daha da kötüleşen çevresel bozulma ve kırılganlıkla nasıl mücadele ettiğini ve bunun sosyal ve ekonomik istikrar üzerindeki etkilerini incelemektedir. Analiz, çevresel kırılganlık, sosyal dışlanmıslık ve iklim değişikliğinin yaşam koşulları ve istikrar üzerindeki artan etkileriyle karakterize edilen Fas bağlamında toplanan saha verilerine dayanmaktadır. Fas'ın güneydoğusunda yer alan Tata vahası, kırılgan ve hassas yerel çevrelerin bir modelini temsil etmektedir. Bu bölgenin çevresi, Kuzey Afrika ülkelerindeki birçok çevreyle benzerlik göstermektedir; bu ülkelerde, genellikle vaha bölgelerini oluşturan çöl iklimine yakın kurak ve yarı kurak alanlar yer almakta ve bu bölgelerde zorlu çevresel koşullara uyum sağlamak amacıyla çeşitli çevresel, siyasi, sömürgeci ve sosyal risklere karşı direnç mekanizmaları geliştirilmiştir. Dışlanma bu topluluklar için yeni bir sorun değildir; ancak yaşam tarzındaki değişimler, artan ihtiyaçlar, demografik büyüme ve daha iyi yaşam koşulları arzusu gibi yeni sorunlar ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu bölgeler, devlet kurumları, yerel otoriteler ve mali ve teknik destek sağlayan önde gelen uluslararası kuruluşların müdahalesi sonrasında hala direnç mekanizmaları geliştirmeye devam etmektedir. Genel olarak bu araştırma, yeni nesil yerel sivil toplum kuruluşlarının direnç mekanizmalarını ve çevresel ve sosyal zorluklar karşısında hayatta kalma arayışında gençlerin yenilikçi müdahaleler yaratmaya ve yerel organizasyonlara liderlik etmeye nasıl devam ettiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Ardından, 1980'lerden bu yana bu bölgelere yoğun şekilde müdahil olan ulusal ve uluslararası, devlet kurumları ve sivil toplum kuru-

luşlarının bu alanlar üzerindeki etkileri incelenerek bu çabaların çağdaş zorluklara karşı direnç geliştirme yolunda gerçekten de doğru bir rota izleyip izlemediği sorgulanmaktadır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Yabancı Fonlar, Yerel Dernekler, Sosyal Sermaye, Dış Yardım Bağımlılığı, Çevresel Kırılganlık

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## Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the interventions of local organizations in mitigating environmental degradation caused by climate change and identifies its impacts on social and economic stability in oasis areas. This study also presents an analysis of the impact of foreign funding on the interventions led by these organizations. To achieve this goal, we begin by identifying a local environmental context characterized by environmental fragility and social marginalization, in light of the increasing impacts of climate change on living conditions and stability in environmentally and socially vulnerable areas in the Southern Mediterranean region, particularly the oasis areas of the Maghreb countries.

Dryland and oasis communities in developing countries are considered to be among the most threatened by climate change impacts and the consequences of increasing human pressure on the environment.<sup>1</sup> In North Africa, climate models and scenarios predict a sharp increase in heatwaves. If global warming reaches 4 degrees Celsius, the water supply will likely decrease, whereas water demand is expected to increase because of population growth and economic development.<sup>2</sup>

Morocco's water demand has exceeded natural replenishment in many areas. Groundwater is the primary source of agricultural industry, farms, and inland towns. Recent droughts, along with the overuse of water and overexploitation of aquifers, are depleting renewable water resources at increasing rates.<sup>3</sup> The Tata Oasis is a model of local environments that are ecologically fragile and sensitive to climate change. The environment of this region is similar to that of many other Mediterranean countries, mainly the South.

Over the coming decades, economic conditions will probably be as important as the manifestations of climate change in driving large population movements—either internally, to neighboring countries, or to another continent.<sup>4</sup> Extremely climatic conditions are not new to these oases. For centuries, the inhabitants of this environment have been able to face these conditions and resist harsh climates; they have developed sustainable agricultural practices to ensure their survival despite such adversity. They demonstrate adaptive capacities and resilience by coping with tough environmental conditions. In the Moroccan Oases, we explored different top-down, bottom-up, regional, and local adaptation strategies applied in response to increasing droughts and desertification rates.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Lorenzo Chelleri et al. "Responses to Drought and Desertification in the Moroccan Drâa Valley Region: Resilience at the Expense of Sustainability?", *The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses* 5/2 (2014), 17-33.

2 Gilles Olakunlé Yabi, "Climate Change and Migration Prospects Between West and North Africa", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2023.

3 Manal Shehabi, "Just Energy Transitions? Lessons From Oman and Morocco", *Climate Change in the Middle East and North Africa: Mitigating Vulnerabilities and Designing Effective Policies*, Ed. Joy Arkeh - Amr Hamzawy. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024.

4 Yabi, "Climate Change and Migration Prospects Between West and North Africa".

5 Chelleri et al. "Responses to Drought and Desertification in the Moroccan Drâa Valley Region: Resilience at the Expense of Sustainability?", 30.

Overall, clinging to the land is one way in which people in Morocco resist the harsh climate. The land provides a sense of stability and security despite unpredictable weather patterns. Indigenous communities are often highly resilient, with extensive knowledge and long-standing traditions of adapting to climate and environmental changes.<sup>6</sup> Oases have been fundamentally transformed over the past century following their gradual integration into both the state's political structure and the capitalist market economy.<sup>7</sup> Marginalization is not a new issue in these societies, but new issues include lifestyle changes, increasing needs, demographic growth, increased expected years of education, the desire for better living conditions, and the rise of migration. Historically, they have adapted to harsh environmental conditions by developing various resistance mechanisms and mobilizing their efforts and resources to confront any danger that threatens their survival and continuity in their lands. Resistance has continued after the intervention of government institutions, local authorities, and prominent international organizations that provide financial and technical support. For example, the Tata region is witnessing the intervention of many international organizations and institutions in supporting local dynamics, especially the European Union, the French Development Agency, Belgian Cooperation, German Cooperation, the French Foundation, and others.

Recent socio-anthropological studies on rural Moroccan civil society have revealed significant transformations in local associative practices, particularly in marginalized regions such as oases. Scholars like Shriky<sup>8</sup>, El Ayadi<sup>9</sup>, and Bono<sup>10</sup> have found that the increase in youth participation in local NGOs is not just a response to immediate development needs but also reflects deeper sociocultural changes and evolving relationships between traditional authority and emerging forms of civic engagement. These studies demonstrate that rural associations have become key platforms for young people not only to improve their socioeconomic conditions but also to assert new roles and identities within their communities. However, they also highlight contradictions and tensions within these processes, particularly in how foreign aid and donor-driven agendas influence local participation dynamics and priorities.

This article builds on these findings by focusing on the Tata oasis, an ecologically and socially fragile zone where local associations are increasingly involved in managing the impacts of climate change and social marginalization. Although previous research has examined

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6 Stephane Hallegatte et al. *Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2016).

7 Hein De Haas, *Migration and Agricultural Transformations in the Oases of Morocco and Tunisia* (Utrecht: KNAG, 2001).

8 Hanaa Shriky, "Le travail associatif des jeunes au Maroc entre modernité et tradition," *Insaniyat* 68 (2015).

9 Taib El Ayadi, *La construction du fait associatif rural au Maroc: approche socio-anthropologique d'une expérience locale de développement* (Doctoral Dissertation, Université Mohammed V – Rabat, 2015).

10 Irene Bono, "L'activisme associatif comme marché du travail: normalisation sociale et politique par les 'activités génératrices de revenus' à El Hajeb". *Politique Africaine* 120/4 (2010), 25–44.

the general trajectory of associative movements in rural Morocco, only limited empirical research has connected these dynamics with environmental fragility and international donor strategies. By situating this study within the broader literature on youth engagement, donor influence and rural civil society, this paper aims to fill a gap in understanding how local actors interpret, adapt or contest foreign-funded interventions. In doing so, it contributes to a nuanced reading of resilience that emphasizes not only institutional support but also the mobilization of local knowledge, traditions (such as Tiwizi), and social capital.

Social capital refers to networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation among individuals and groups. According to Robert Putnam<sup>11</sup>, social capital is defined as “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” In a similar context, cultural capital, as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu<sup>12</sup>, encompasses non-financial assets such as education, skills, cultural knowledge, and embodied practices that individuals acquire through socialization and that can be mobilized to maintain or improve one’s social status. In rural Moroccan communities, particularly in Amazigh areas, Tiwizi practice is a vivid example of local and traditional cultural capital rooted in both collective knowledge and customary values<sup>13</sup>. Tiwizi is a customary system of mutual aid and collaborative labor in which community members voluntarily help each other with agricultural, construction, or communal tasks. This deeply embedded social practice reflects inherited cultural competence—an embodied tradition of cooperation and solidarity—and strengthens local cohesion and facilitates collective resilience despite economic or environmental challenges. Thus, Tiwizi exemplifies both the social capital (through trust and networks) and cultural capital (through shared practices and norms) that underpin community survival strategies in rural Morocco.

## 1. Approach and Method:

This study is based on fieldwork conducted between May 2023 and June 2024 in the oases of the Tata region in southeast Morocco (as shown in figure 1). The fieldwork focused on understanding the perceptions and practices of local youth involved in small-scale civil society organizations. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complexity and depth of participants’ lived experiences, motivations, and interpretations of their socio-environmental context. Specifically, the focus group technique was adopted because it facilitates dynamic interaction among participants, allowing for the emergence of shared meanings, community narratives, and divergent viewpoints that are particularly useful in exploring collective practices and local discourses.

11 Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 167.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

13 Fatima Mernissi, *ONG Rurales du Haut-Atlas: Les Aït-Débrouille* (Rabat: Editions Marsam, 2003), 44.

Participants were selected using the snowball sampling method, which is particularly appropriate for qualitative research in community settings where social trust and networks play a key role in access and credibility. This approach began with key youth informants engaged in local NGOs, who then recommended other participants based on their involvement in community activities. Although willingness to participate was a necessary logistical condition, it was not the sole criterion. Rather, participant relevance to the research problem—in terms of their direct engagement in local associations and knowledge of international funding dynamics—was the primary selection principle, ensuring the purposeful sampling of information-rich cases.

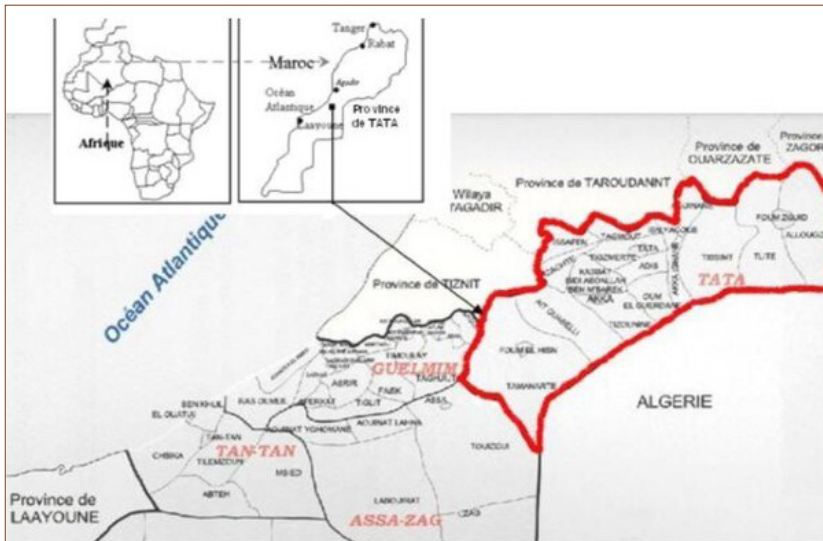


Figure 1. The Tata oasis in southeast Morocco<sup>14</sup>

This paper is based on data collected by adopting the focus group technique, which targeted 52 young local NGO activists from different regions of Tata who attended ten interactive workshops (focus groups) organized in partnership with local associations. The focus group questions we asked the 52 participants included the following four main topics:

- Their perception of the current living conditions in Tata.
- Resistance to environmental, social and economic crises.
- Their perception of projects and activities implemented by local NGOs that benefit from international donor funding.
- Their aspirations and visions regarding their region’s future.

14 Abdelhamid Hamdouch et al. “Chemical Constituents and Antioxidant Activity of the Essential Oils of *Perralderia coronopifolia* Cosson subsp. *Purpurascens* Shrub of Oasis of Tata from South East of Morocco”, *Applied Journal of Environmental Engineering Science* 3/4 (2017).



The aim of this data is to build an interpretation of the extent to which NGO interventions affect environmental and social conditions as well as to clarify the relationship between the success of these interventions and international funding. The table below shows the distribution and characteristics of the research participants.

Table 1: Focus group organization and conduct, and participant characteristics.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Number and Age of Participants</b>                    | 52 participants, aged between 15 and 35 years   |
| <b>Number of Groups</b>                                  | 12 groups   |
| <b>Workshop Organization Period</b>                      | From May 2, 2023, to June 30, 2024  |
| <b>Associations Involved in Organizing the Workshops</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Karyati Forum Association</li> <li>● Agadir Oumghar Association</li> <li>● Tamdout Association</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Participant Selection</b>                             | <p>Non-random selection based on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Young people's willingness to participate by responding to the call for applications.</li> <li>● Participants invited based on peer recommendations (snowball sampling method).</li> </ul>                         |
| <b>Targeted Categories</b>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● By Interest: Community and political actors</li> <li>● By Professional Status: Students, civil servants, employees, and unemployed youth</li> <li>● By Residential Area: Urban (75% rural)</li> <li>● By Gender: Men and women (46.15% women)</li> </ul> |

## 2. Results

In the Tata region, young people are currently trying to overcome difficult circumstances by joining associations and developing income-generating cooperatives. These organizations (associations and cooperatives) are seen as more attractive than political parties because they benefit from the support of state and international institutions (such as the US embassy, the European Union, international NGOs, etc.).

According to the perception of young people in Tata, these NGOs do not require much knowledge, skills, or capital. Moreover, these organizations have spread widely in different regions of this oasis, and the state has encouraged the inhabitants to create them to institutionalize traditional organizations and monitor forms of solidarity by requiring the declaration of association members and the declaration of their funds to the tax administration, in addition to the declaration to the General Secretariat of the Government to receive international funding.

These small-scale and limited-activity associations and cooperatives, in particular, focus on water management and irrigation, literacy, preschool education, local hygiene, road construction, and providing assistance to residents and authorities in the event of environmental risks. These movements are primarily active at the local level (“D’war”). They also sometimes provide opportunities for organizing agricultural work and managing collective irrigation. A group of these organizations benefited from financial support provided by international donors, especially the European Union, which granted a set of funds between 2020 and 2021 for projects related to advocacy and strengthening the capacities of young people and women. The French Embassy also provided other funds for sustainable development and training young people to lead local initiatives. This funding had an important impact on the work of these NGOs, which developed their resources and implemented activities that raised issues that local NGOs had not previously been interested in (for example: advocacy, sustainable development, gender approach, etc.).

Young people often consider these activities as opportunities to hone their skills and develop their knowledge, rather than activities that primarily concern the local population and their real needs, given that local NGOs did not choose these issues freely, but rather they were proposed by donors (in the form of a call for projects). However, young people have developed local initiatives in the context of crises that the region has experienced (floods, fires, earthquakes, etc.) and other NGOs have contributed to organizing agricultural irrigation and preserving the oasis to ensure continued environmental and social stability.

Young people emphasize that their current living conditions are harsh and difficult, and their work through these small movements is seen as a form of resistance to instability. They are also convinced that their interventions will not change much of the situation and will have limited impact. Therefore, they currently only aspire to reduce the impact of social marginalization on their living conditions in the oasis, waiting for the right time to emigrate as a solution.

The youth of this oasis do not believe that current interventions can create good living conditions, so everyone is thinking of emigrating to other cities. Those who decide to stay in this oasis and continue to resist are those who have a permanent government job (usually teachers in government schools) or who have recently graduated from university and are waiting to get a government job. Therefore, we find that most members of the local associations are from this socio-professional category.

These young people tend to establish associations or to join existing ones, and they often do so to obtain funding from international donors, so they express in their discussions that the criterion for the success of local organizations is mainly related to the amount of funding obtained. However, this criterion changes if they join Micro-movements that already exist and are led by elders or are related to the management of local needs (water, agriculture, paving roads, etc.), where the criterion for success becomes linked to the extent of resistance to social marginalization and environmental fragility. In fact, we find some

local associations that have received foreign funding directing some of the funds (without declaring this to the donors) to provide basic needs for the population that are not included in the terms of the funding agreement (for example, an association that benefited from foreign funding provided the local population with ladders to facilitate climbing to palm trees and picking the fruit).

Projects funded by international donors respond to the terms of the project call more than they respond to the real needs and requirements of the local population; therefore, they are considered only projects that respond to donor calls. Their impact remains limited, and people are not convinced by them. We also note that these donors have symbolic power that is often shown in the amount of preparations by the local associations that benefit from the grant when a donor representative visits them.

### 3. Discussion

Rural areas and oases have always been areas that attract projects from many national and international institutions in the context of growing global interest in rural development, and the call for spatial equality and territorial justice as a basic element to increase human development indicators in these areas, which are described as less benefiting from public services, especially in the countries of the South.

Major institutions have directed their projects to rural areas in various parts of the world to upgrade these areas and provide suitable living conditions for their inhabitants. The World Bank highlighted this matter in a publication entitled “The World Bank and Participation” issued in 1994, where it presented an evaluative statistical analysis that included 121 projects to access water in rural areas in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which benefited from the support of 18 international agencies, including the World Bank.<sup>15</sup>

International interest in these rural areas increased after the concept of “rural development” was introduced in a speech given by Robert McNamara, then President of the World Bank, before the Bank’s Board of Governors in Nairobi in 1973,<sup>16</sup> in which he proposed a strategy for rural development with an emphasis on agricultural and small-scale farming production, while at the same time warning that official development assistance was insufficient and that more than 800 million people were living in extreme poverty. In the five years immediately following this speech, the Bank Group’s financing for development efforts increased by more than 40%, and since that period, the World Bank has been a strong advocate for rural development and has encouraged institutions, programs, and projects that intervene in this issue<sup>17</sup>.

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15 James L. Creighton, *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 20.

16 Robert McNamara, “Address to the Board of Governors (World Bank)” (Access 15 November 2024).

17 McNamara, “Address to the Board of Governors (World Bank) “.

At the beginning of the 21st century, following the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's entry into a phase of restructuring—marked by the Lisbon meeting in 2001 and the Agadir Declaration on May 8, 2001, which aimed to establish a free trade zone—the Barcelona Declaration identified three main axes of cooperation: the political and security axis, the economic and financial axis, and the social and humanitarian axis. The development of civil society was highlighted as a key component of the third axis of the Barcelona Declaration<sup>18</sup>. Support for NGOs across various regions of the southern Mediterranean intensified during the first decade of the 21st century, facilitated by programs such as the MEDA Program and the European Initiative for Human Rights<sup>19</sup>.

The current environmental crisis in rural and oasis areas such as Tata is not merely an ecological issue but a deeply rooted socio-political challenge shaped by external interventions, historical marginalization, and global development logics. While local associations have long been active in confronting environmental fragility, recent transformations—particularly under the influence of international funding—have introduced new dynamics into the local landscape. These interventions, often framed through development discourses like resilience, gender equality and advocacy, rarely emerge from the communities themselves. Rather, they reflect donor-driven agendas shaped by geopolitical priorities and funding trends, creating a disconnect between local needs and externally imposed project goals. This divergence raises questions about the autonomy of local actors and whether such interventions genuinely strengthen their capacities to respond to climate change or instead entrench new forms of dependency and symbolic subordination.

Building on recent scholarship on civil society and donor influence<sup>20</sup>, this study reveals how local associations in the Tata oasis simultaneously resist and reproduce global power dynamics. Youth-led NGOs, while engaging in innovative environmental and social initiatives, are often steered toward donor interests that prioritize visibility, short-term project outcomes, and alignment with EuroMediterranean cooperation strategies. The symbolic power of international donors becomes visible not only in project selection criteria but also in the performative nature of local NGO activities during donor visits, and the prioritization of compliance over contextual relevance. This tension undermines the potential of grassroots initiatives to enact long-term, community-rooted ecological resilience and reinforces a model in which success is measured by financial absorption rather than local transformation. To understand the real impact of these dynamics, it is crucial to move beyond an instrumental view of funding and examine how social capital, local

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18 Thomas Lacroix, “Contrôle et Instrumentalisation de la Société Civile Maghrébine dans la Coopération Euro-Méditerranéenne: Le Cas du Maroc et de la Tunisie”, *L'Année du Maghreb* 1 (2004).

19 Lacroix, “Contrôle et Instrumentalisation de la Société Civile Maghrébine dans la Coopération Euro-Méditerranéenne: Le Cas du Maroc et de la Tunisie»

20 E.g. Mernissi, *ONG Rurales du Haut-Atlas : Les Aït-Débrouille*. ; Lacroix, “Contrôle et Instrumentalisation de la Société Civile Maghrébine dans la Coopération Euro-Méditerranéenne : Le Cas du Maroc et de la Tunisie”. ; Kane, “International NGOs and the Aid Industry: Constraints on International Solidarity”,

knowledge, and traditional practices like “Tiwizi” offer alternative logics of resistance and sustainability.

At the local level—as is the case in various Moroccan villages—other factors contributed to the growth of this interest in rural development, and were mainly represented by the efforts of Moroccan immigrants in Europe who tried to establish associations between the two shores of the Mediterranean, in order to improve the conditions of these rural areas (water management, electricity supply, paving roads, etc.), which created a local developmental associative dynamic that led to an “associative explosion” in various Moroccan villages, which Zakia Daoud described as contagious initiatives, after the phenomenon extended to include most of Morocco’s regions in the 1980s<sup>21</sup>.

In this context, Fatima Mernissi reviews the importance of this type of NGOs in providing decent living conditions in her study published in 2003 on rural NGOs in the High Atlas (Morocco), where she considers them a modern expression of the societal commitment of individuals toward the group, and confirms that this societal commitment is considered a legacy and social capital that includes the values of participation, solidarity, and trust<sup>22</sup>.

NGOs have played a fundamental role in the emergence of active citizenship in Morocco, providing responses to economic and social challenges, especially those intensified by crises such as the drought of the 1990s. A number of factors have contributed to the remarkable growth of these civil organizations, the most important of which are: Morocco’s adoption of economic liberalization policies that led to a reduction in state responsibilities and the transfer of some of these responsibilities to NGOs, and the intervention of many international organizations, which contributed to the development and financing of the activities of national and local NGOs, especially in areas such as health, human rights, and support for gender issues, etc.<sup>23</sup>

A different perspective and uncertainty emerged after the increase in support offered by international organizations and embassies to local NGOs, especially in rural areas that are the origin of Moroccan immigrants in Europe. Everyone searched for an answer to the question: Why is this financial support directed to these areas?<sup>24</sup> A group of points of view answers this question by considering that the purpose of this funding is to reduce population migration to Europe, by providing suitable living conditions for the children and families of immigrants who are still in Morocco. Therefore, the support specifically targets NGOs located in the villages of Moroccan immigrants in Europe (for example, the Sous region -Southern Morocco).

21 Daoud, Zakya. *Marocains des Deux Rives*. (Paris : Les Éditions de l’Atelier CCFD, 1997), 125.

22 Mernissi, *ONG Rurales du Haut-Atlas: Les Aït-Débrouille*, 39.

23 Guilain Denœux - Laetitia Gateau, “L’essor des Associations au Maroc: À la Recherche de la Citoyenneté?”, *Monde Arabe* 150/4 (1995), 27.

24 Aljazeera Net. “Jadal bil-Maghrib Bishan Tamwil Al-Jam’iyyat Al-Madaniyya”, (Access 08 November 2024).

Associations that receive international funding were considered to be acting on behalf of the agenda of foreign countries and international organizations, especially after September 11 and after the European Union adopted a group of neighborhood strategies: such as the European Security Strategy (2003) and the European Neighborhood Policy (2004), and its aim to support issues that serve European security and its strategies more than they serve Moroccan social, environmental, and cultural security. Morocco has therefore moved to monitor foreign funding received by Moroccan NGOs by requiring associations to declare the source and purpose of these funds.<sup>25</sup>

According to international donors, strengthening civil society in the South was part of the political level within the framework of neoliberal thought and the structural adjustment programs associated with it. First, it concerns reducing the state's efficiency, transparency, and legitimacy. Second, it is a matter of strengthening the development of civil society, which should, on the one hand, partially fill the void left by the withdrawal of public institutions, and on the other hand, play an intermediary role in the process of decentralization and democratization.<sup>26</sup> But has this international funding truly contributed to fostering local democracy and the independence of civil society actors? Some argue that this support has not strengthened civil society but has instead weakened its role, as prioritizing political stability in the region has further marginalized the social dimension. Political pluralism and the protection of human rights have been deprioritized, falling to the bottom of the authorities' agendas.<sup>27</sup> This prompts the question: how can the impact of this support be effectively evaluated?

In the Moroccan context, the success of NGOs in achieving local development and facing environmental, climatic and geographical challenges is not linked to international financial support, but rather to the degree of influence of social capital, which is manifested in the values of solidarity and local social cohesion associated with traditional local organization.<sup>28</sup> For example, the tradition of "Tiwizi" requires local families to engage in solidarity in activities and projects of public interest.

The results of this paper can be interpreted by distinguishing between two types of local organizations: the first type includes organizations whose success criteria are receiving foreign funding; the second type includes organizations whose success criteria are their ability to confront conditions of social marginalization and environmental fragility. However, some organizations from the first type adopt the second criterion whenever they are

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25 Lacroix, "Contrôle et Instrumentalisation de la Société Civile Maghrébine dans la Coopération Euro-Méditerranéenne: Le Cas du Maroc et de la Tunisie".

26 Molly Kane, "International NGOs and the Aid Industry: Constraints on International Solidarity", *Third World Quarterly* 34/8 (2013), 1507.

27 Lacroix, "Contrôle et Instrumentalisation de la Société Civile Maghrébine dans la Coopération Euro-Méditerranéenne : Le Cas du Maroc et de la Tunisie».

28 Mernissi, *ONG Rurales du Haut-Atlas : Les Aït-Débrouille*, 44.

subject to one of the elements of social capital (solidarity in the event of a natural disaster, the intervention of an elderly person in the organization, social and economic facts and events related to kinship or the local community, etc.).

The findings revealed that youth engagement in local NGOs is shaped by diverse social backgrounds and motivations. Based on the data collected, we identified three key participant profiles: “aspirational youth”, “pragmatic civil servants”, and “traditional actors”.

- Aspirational youth include university graduates, students, and unemployed young people who view participation in NGOs as a pathway to acquiring skills, expanding professional networks, and preparing for future migration. Their engagement is often driven by the desire for self-development rather than long-term commitment to the region;
- Pragmatic civil servants, mostly public school teachers and municipal employees, are typically motivated by institutional incentives or personal stability. They join or establish NGOs to obtain funding, fulfill administrative expectations, or support modest improvements in local conditions. For them, participation is a strategic act that aligns with their job security and community roles;
- Traditional actors include individuals rooted in community heritage, such as elder residents. Their engagement in associations is often based on customary practices like “Tiwizi”, emphasizing mutual aid, collective work, and local resilience. These actors tend to prioritize initiatives that address immediate and tangible needs of the community.

Several case examples from the field illustrate how these different profiles interact with donor funding and local dynamics. One notable case involved a youth-led association in the village of “AKKA” that implemented a donor-funded project on environmental advocacy and gender inclusion. While the project provided useful training and enhanced visibility for the youth, participants acknowledged that themes were largely dictated by the donor’s call for proposals, not local priorities.

In contrast, in the village of “Agouliz”, a grassroots association without external funding mobilized during a sudden flood in 2024. They organized emergency food distribution, coordinated road cleaning, and repaired vital irrigation infrastructure—all based on local resources and social networks. Another example involves an association that received a grant to promote sustainable development but discreetly redirected part of the funds to purchase ladders for date harvesting, a pressing local need not included in the donor’s project framework.

Therefore, we confirm that the success of local associations in resisting social marginalization and environmental fragility has a strong relationship with social capital but not with foreign funding provided by international organizations. The latter is important for increasing the commitment and involvement of young people in Micro-movement organizations.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, we emphasize the importance of local associations that play essential roles in resisting social marginalization and environmental fragility in oases. This action is rooted in social capital represented by traditional values, solidarity, and social cohesion, which motivates individuals to commit to the group and engage in the dynamics of local interventions.

We also emphasize that international organizations that provide funding have contributed to the involvement of young people in local associations and have pushed them to care about issues new to the oasis population, such as advocacy and gender equality. However, this funding imposes restrictions related to the conditions set by international organizations, which push young people to acknowledge the limited impact of projects funded by foreign grants and their connection to issues that do not necessarily serve the needs of the local population.

We conclude that resisting social marginalization and environmental fragility is not necessarily linked to international funding (material capital) but rather to traditional values and social cohesion (social capital). Based on this conclusion, we offer the following recommendations to international donors and organizations:

- Reconsidering the conditions and restrictions of support related to intervention issues;
- Targeting local organizations that are linked to social capital;
- Supporting Micro-movements (whether non-profit or for-profit) that resist social marginalization and environmental fragility will reduce migration;
- Reconsidering the philosophy of partnership and reducing the symbolic and material dominance of international organizations over local Micro-movements.



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