

# Territorial Stakeholders' Perceptions of the Mechanisms Linking Territorial Governance to Local Economic Development: A Qualitative Study in the Moroccan Context

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between territorial governance and local economic development while identifying the intermediate mechanisms and territorial factors that shape and influence this relationship within the Moroccan context. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on 17 semi-structured interviews conducted with territorial stakeholders representing various institutions, including local elected officials, administrative managers, provincial authorities, public institutions, development organizations, and civil society actors. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach supported by NVivo software. The findings indicate that territorial governance promotes local economic development through improved stakeholder coordination, participatory decision-making, resource mobilization, innovation, and strengthened partnerships. The results also reveal that territory-specific characteristics significantly influence the effectiveness of governance mechanisms, highlighting the contextual nature of the relationship between territorial governance and local economic development.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research - Local economic development - Territorial governance

**JEL Classification :** R11 ; R58 ; H70 ; H77 ; Z18

## 1. Introduction

In response to the transformation of public action, decentralization reforms, and the growing demands of sustainable development, territorial governance has progressively emerged as a major paradigm in development policies. It is based on a logic of coordination among a wide range of stakeholders—including local governments, decentralized state services, businesses, civil society organizations, and citizens—to design development strategies tailored to the specific characteristics of territories. Consequently, territory is no longer viewed merely as an administrative unit but rather as a dynamic system of interactions in which the quality of cooperation, institutions, and available resources determines both economic and social performance.

This evolution is widely supported by the existing literature. Several studies identify territorial governance as a key driver of territorial development by improving stakeholder coordination, enhancing stakeholder



integration, and strengthening the quality of public decision-making (Bertrand & Moquay, 2004; Hammani & Angade, 2024). Mechanisms of proximity—geographical, organizational, and institutional—facilitate interactions, reinforce local cooperation, foster resource mobilization, and promote the emergence of collective development initiatives (Hammani & Angade, 2024; Lahaye, 2002). From this perspective, territorial governance is understood as a process of collective regulation based on stakeholder networks, consultation, and contractual arrangements (Bertrand & Moquay, 2004; Morin, 1998).

The literature also emphasizes that the effectiveness of territorial governance largely depends on stakeholder participation, trust, communication, and the quality of relationships among local actors. Several studies demonstrate that these factors enhance public management, stimulate territorial innovation, and improve the performance of public policies (Khayati & Eddelani Oumhani, 2022; Er-Raji, 2023; Zbir, 2020). Other research highlights the importance of citizen participation, social capital, and cooperative mechanisms in fostering successful territorial development, while emphasizing that these processes remain highly dependent on institutional settings and the specific characteristics of each territory (Samb, 2014; Pasquier et al., 2007).

Furthermore, several authors argue that territorial governance is increasingly embedded within a multilevel governance framework, where local, regional, and national decision-making levels interact, making stronger institutional coordination essential (Gilly & Wallet, 2005; Khomsi & Sabri, 2026). Such governance contributes to more efficient resource allocation, improved investment performance, and territorial economic growth while generating positive spillover effects across territories. The studies of Belbouli et al. (2024) and Bacha (2019) further demonstrate that high-quality governance promotes economic development, job creation, territorial attractiveness, and investment, whereas weak governance characterized by institutional deficiencies or corruption constitutes a major obstacle to development.

Within the Moroccan context, previous research highlights significant progress resulting from advanced regionalization reforms and the strengthening of local government competencies, while also pointing to several persistent challenges. Although territorial governance has contributed to improving public sector performance, citizen participation, and the valorization of human capital (Cherkaoui Rhazouani & El Aissaoui, 2021), it continues to face coordination difficulties, persistent centralization, limited local capacities, and insufficient territorial autonomy (Badri, 2019; Tahrouch & Derbal, 2021; El Khazzani & Ragbi, 2025). Other studies have identified shortcomings related to communication, transparency, and citizen involvement in territorial development projects (Ennaimi et al., 2025; Oulbacha & Ayegou, 2025). Finally, several authors underline the crucial role of territorial governance in promoting knowledge creation, territorial intelligence, innovation, and sustainable development (Duvinage, 2003; Haddad & Bouzaida, 2013; Akhayad, 2023), while contributing to the reduction of spatial disparities and fostering more balanced territorial development (Drevet, 2011; Tijaoui, 2026).

Despite the richness of the existing literature, two important gaps remain. First, most studies examine either territorial governance or local economic development independently, without explicitly explaining the mechanisms through which governance influences development outcomes. Second, relatively few empirical studies have simultaneously investigated the role of intermediate mechanisms—such as

coordination, cooperation, innovation, and resource mobilization—and the territorial characteristics that may strengthen or weaken this relationship, particularly within the Moroccan context.

To address this research gap, this study seeks to answer the following question: **How does territorial governance contribute to local economic development, and what mechanisms and territorial factors explain this relationship?** Specifically, the study pursues three objectives: (i) to analyze territorial stakeholders' perceptions of the influence of territorial governance on local economic development; (ii) to identify the intermediate mechanisms through which this relationship operates; and (iii) to examine the territorial factors that may reinforce or constrain these effects.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on seventeen semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse panel of Moroccan territorial stakeholders, including municipal presidents, municipal directors, provincial officials, representatives of decentralized government services, development agencies, and national and international organizations. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software, enabling the identification of the key dimensions of territorial governance, the intermediate mechanisms, and the territorial factors that structure the relationship between territorial governance and local economic development.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research approach to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which territorial governance influences local economic development. This methodological choice is justified by the need to capture the perceptions, experiences, and practices of stakeholders directly involved in territorial governance.

Empirical data were collected through seventeen semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse panel of territorial stakeholders selected using purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in the design, coordination, implementation, or monitoring of territorial development projects. The sample encompasses a broad range of institutions and governance levels, thereby enabling the integration of multiple perspectives and providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of territorial governance dynamics.

**Table 1. Profile of the Respondents**

Respondent	Position	Affiliated Institution	Role in the Territory
R1	Project Engineer	NOVEC (CDG Group)	National coordination of drinking water supply projects
R2	District Director	Municipality of Casablanca	Territorial administrative coordination
R3	Environmental and Climate Change Specialist	FERMA Project – SOCODEVI / ANEF	Sustainable natural resource management
R4	Program Coordinator	Targa-AIDE (PRDTS)	Support for territorial development initiatives
R5	Vice-President of the District Council	District Council	Management of local public affairs
R6	Provincial Director	Regional Multiservices Company of Fès–Meknès	Management of essential public services and infrastructure
R7	Vice-President	Regional Council of Fès–Meknès	Regional governance
R8	Head of the Administrative Division	Municipality of Sidi Bibi	Municipal administrative coordination
R9	Head of the Territorial Authorities Division	Prefecture	Coordination among territorial institutions
R10	Association President / Commercial Director	INDH Partner Association and Private Sector	Entrepreneurship and employability development
R11	Company Manager	Public Works Company	Development of territorial infrastructure
R12	Mayor	Municipality of Majjate	Leadership of municipal development
R13	President of the Municipal Council	Municipality of Dar El Kebdani	Municipal governance and development
R14	Director of Municipal Services	Municipality of Bouarous	Municipal administrative and technical coordination
R15	Head of the Territorial Authorities Division	Province of Driouch	Coordination and oversight of local authorities
R16	Director of Municipal Services	Municipality of Sebaa Rouadi	Administrative management of municipal policies
R17	Program Director	AMIDEAST	Human capital development and territorial coordination

The diversity of respondents ensured comprehensive coverage of the various dimensions of territorial governance, encompassing both decision-making levels and operational actors responsible for implementing development projects, while also incorporating institutional, economic, and civil society stakeholders involved in local development.

The interview guide was structured around six main themes: (i) the respondent's profile and the territorial context; (ii) territorial governance mechanisms, including coordination, participation, cooperation, conflict management, and the territorialization of public policies; (iii) the intermediate mechanisms linking

territorial governance to local economic development; (iv) local economic development dynamics; (v) the role of territorial characteristics in shaping the effectiveness of governance; and (vi) the relationship between territorial governance and local economic development, together with the recommendations provided by the respondents.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Territorial Governance Is Primarily Based on Coordination and Cooperation Among Stakeholders

The analysis of the seventeen interviews reveals that territorial governance is primarily founded on coordination and cooperation mechanisms among institutional stakeholders. Respondents emphasized that coordination is mainly achieved through regular coordination meetings, partnership agreements, monitoring committees, and consultation bodies bringing together local authorities, decentralized state services, public institutions, and local partners. The principal planning instruments—including the Municipal Action Plan (MAP), the Regional Spatial Planning Scheme (RSPS), the Urban Master Development Plan (UMDP), and the programs implemented under the National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD)—emerged as the main institutional frameworks supporting this coordination. As one respondent stated, *"coordination is mainly organized through coordination meetings chaired by the Governor,"* while another explained that *"partnership agreements define the roles and commitments of each stakeholder."* These findings indicate that territorial governance is fundamentally built upon institutional consultation and stakeholder cooperation.

#### 3.2. Stakeholder Participation Varies Across Categories of Actors

The interviews reveal varying degrees of participation among territorial stakeholders. Local authorities, provincial administrations, decentralized state services, and public institutions are the actors most actively involved in decision-making processes. Civil society organizations and associations regularly participate in territorial development projects, particularly in the preparation of Municipal Action Plans and NIHD programs. In contrast, citizens are mainly involved during the consultation phases of the Municipal Action Plan, while several respondents considered that economic actors remain insufficiently engaged in decision-making processes. These findings suggest that territorial governance continues to be largely dominated by public institutions, despite a gradual shift toward a more participatory governance model.

#### 3.3. Intermediate Mechanisms Explaining the Impact of Territorial Governance

The qualitative analysis identified several mechanisms through which territorial governance influences local economic development. Respondents indicated that governance improves communication among institutions, facilitates information sharing, and strengthens trust between partners. It also promotes the emergence of innovative projects, enhances the mobilization of financial, human, and technical resources, and supports the development of sustainable partnerships among public, private, and civil society actors. These mechanisms contribute to improving decision-making quality, increasing policy coherence, and enhancing the effectiveness of territorial development policies. Overall, the findings confirm that the effects of territorial governance on local economic development are largely mediated by cooperation, coordination, and the collective mobilization of resources.

### **3.4. Territorial Factors Moderating the Effectiveness of Territorial Governance**

Respondents unanimously emphasized that the effectiveness of territorial governance depends strongly on the specific characteristics of each territory. Natural resources, infrastructure, geographical location, territorial identity, human capital, stakeholder competencies, and cultural specificities were identified as the principal factors influencing the success of territorial development policies. Several respondents highlighted the importance of agricultural resources, thermal springs, tourism potential, road infrastructure, and proximity to major urban centers in fostering local development. Conversely, territories characterized by geographical isolation, limited resources, or weak institutional capacity face greater difficulties in mobilizing stakeholders and attracting investment. These findings indicate that territorial characteristics act as moderating factors in the relationship between territorial governance and local economic development.

### **3.5. The Effects of Territorial Governance on Local Economic Development**

All respondents agreed that territorial governance exerts a positive influence on local economic development. The main reported impacts include job creation, enhanced territorial attractiveness, increased investment mobilization, support for entrepreneurship, better valorization of local resources, and the development of key sectors such as agriculture, tourism, infrastructure, and essential public services, particularly drinking water supply. Respondents also emphasized that effective governance improves project coordination, increases the efficiency of public investment, and strengthens territorial competitiveness. Consequently, local economic development emerges as the outcome of governance systems capable of mobilizing local resources, bringing stakeholders together, and building a shared strategic vision.

### **3.6. Major Barriers to Effective Territorial Governance**

Despite the progress achieved, the interviews identified several obstacles limiting the effectiveness of territorial governance. Respondents mainly referred to cumbersome administrative procedures, coordination difficulties among institutions, insufficient financial resources, the persistence of centralized decision-making, limited involvement of the private sector, and political or institutional conflicts that may delay project implementation. Additional constraints include the shortage of technical expertise within some local governments and weak territorial marketing strategies, which reduce the capacity of territories to attract investment. These findings suggest that strengthening territorial governance requires simultaneous improvements in the institutional, financial, and organizational capacities of territorial stakeholders.

### **3.7. Recommendations Proposed by Territorial Stakeholders**

The recommendations formulated by the respondents converge around several priority areas for improving territorial governance. Stakeholders emphasized the need to strengthen human resource capacity through training, accelerate the digitalization of public administrations, improve transparency and accountability, and promote the use of information and communication technologies. They also highlighted the importance of reinforcing consultation, cooperation, and partnership mechanisms across different levels of governance while ensuring greater policy coherence. Finally, several respondents recommended strengthening territorial marketing, enhancing the valorization of local resources, and increasing the

participation of economic actors and citizens in decision-making processes in order to sustainably improve the effectiveness of local development policies.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between territorial governance and local economic development while identifying the intermediate mechanisms and territorial factors that shape this relationship within the Moroccan context. Based on seventeen semi-structured interviews conducted with territorial stakeholders, the findings indicate that territorial governance serves as a key driver of local economic development when it promotes stakeholder coordination, consultation, institutional cooperation, and resource mobilization.

The analysis further reveals that the impact of territorial governance on local economic development is primarily mediated by strengthened partnerships, information sharing, trust among stakeholders, innovation, and the mobilization of financial, human, and technical resources. It also demonstrates that territory-specific characteristics—including natural resources, infrastructure, human capital, institutional capacity, and territorial identity—moderate the effectiveness of governance mechanisms.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the existing literature by providing an integrated understanding of the interactions among territorial governance, intermediate mechanisms, and local economic development. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need to strengthen stakeholder coordination, enhance stakeholder participation, build institutional capacity, and promote greater policy coherence in order to improve territorial performance and foster sustainable local economic development.

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