

TOURISM, HERITAGE TERRITORIAL AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTHEASTERN MIDDLE ATLAS (MOROCCO)

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Morocco possesses in its mountain regions (Rif, Middle Atlas, High Atlas, Anti-Atlas) a great part of its natural and patrimonial resources. Actually, these spaces are in crisis and present difficult living conditions for their inhabitants, an issue that contrasts with their natural, environmental and patrimonial wealth.

The northeast of the Middle Atlas is presented as a peripheral and isolated territorial environment within Morocco, difficult to access, traditionally neglected in the historical development by those who have administered it, always from outside of its territory. These two important handicaps are combined with the same physical-geographic environment and the suspicion of the local population according to their exclusion from the development strategies implemented in Morocco.

However, it is a space that has specific strengths that give it its own identity and make it a territory with important patrimonial values and strategic interests. It features natural, human and cultural resources which are the basis of its potentialities: fresh climate, abundant snow, valleys of great scenic beauty, natural character of certain places with rich floristic diversity and with karstic formations, as well as the persistence of local practices and customary cultural traditions.

All this is supported by dynamics governed by local modes of production based on traditional knowledge, that it has been able to combine economic, social and ecological organization with the maintenance of a harmonious balance in the human-environment relationship. However, from approximately three decades ago, as a result of the crisis experienced and living in the mountainous areas of Morocco, the imbalance of the local economic and territorial system is making a clear dent in the environmental characteristics.

The result is a continuous process of delinking the bonds between local populations and their natural environment that is noted in forms of abandonment and deterioration rural that affect some municipalities in the region. In this sense, they play against the fact that both public and private interventions have been very limited, with what is maintained the status of remote, isolated and marginalized area.

The symptoms of the crisis can be summarized in the lack of favourable conditions for socio-cultural and economic dynamics and for the accumulation of goods, which translates into a poor economy with low impetus. Aspects that have been detected in the surveys and interviews carried out in rural communities, whose results are summarized below:

- A strong anthropogenic influence in a fragile and vulnerable environment, which as a result, leads to an continuous and worrying degradation of natural resources. The human pressure on these spaces and forest landscapes is alarming, and in fact, the same cultural heritage is in an advanced state of degradation.
- The mobility of people and goods is low, with extremely weak flows, due to the poor infrastructure, weakness and scarcity of basic equipment.
- A pyramid of young population, with low productivity. The potential of workforce is insufficiently exploited.
- High illiteracy rates that are coupled with very low rates of school enrolment, especially among the female population.
- The deficiencies and the lack of intervention of the State in the territorial development reinforce the precariousness and vulnerability of local populations, next to the inefficiency of development partnerships.
- Forms of abandonment and rural deterioration are detected which affect “aduares” and the most isolated communities.

Moreover, the socio-economic situation, according to indicators of vulnerability and poverty, is negatively critical. Almost all the rural communities of this mountainous area present rates of fragility and precarious poverty, significantly above the national average.

The realization of a SWOT analysis of the tourism role in the Middle East Atlas presents, in a schematically exposed way, the following results:

- Strengths:
 - Richness and variety of natural and cultural heritage,
 - Proximity to Europe,
 - The value of artisanal practices,
 - Little marked seasonality,
 - Stable political framework,
 - Suitable climate
 - The role that local associations could play.
- Weaknesses:
 - Atonement and weak character of the internal market,
 - Scant promotion and external visibility,

- o Weakness of the tourist infrastructure
- o Lack of adequate channels of distribution and promotion.

- Opportunities:
 - o Potential of tourism activities that can be developed,
 - o Favourable investment framework,
 - o New restructuration of tourist destinations worldwide,
 - o Development cooperation
 - o European policies with neighbouring countries, in particular the Maghreb.

- Threats:
 - o Vulnerability derived from fashions,
 - o Potential competitors from the mountain regions of Morocco,
 - o Professionalization of the sector,
 - o Environmental degradation,
 - o Lack of transparency in the processes
 - o Threats latent in the image of the Muslim territories.

All resources of territorial, natural and cultural heritage can help to boost the development of this economically impoverished region. The enhancement of these resources is a necessary condition for the promotion of tourism.

The take-off of tourism in tune with sustainability in the northeast of the Middle Atlas, should have a positive impact on the economy of the region, according to a series of conditions:

- The existence of a specific density threshold for the infrastructures necessary to activate tourism activities; the correct take-off of these activities will depend on the adequacy, effectiveness, function and location of these infrastructures.
- The need to support strategies for dissemination and promotion of tourism activities. The tourism potential of the northeast of the Middle Atlas is practically unknown by potential users both at nationally and internationally level. The action programs for tourism must take into account the expectations of the visitors and an appropriate marketing approach, based on the tourist promotion of the specific products of the region.
- The leveraging a local base of productive activities of goods and services that combine the authenticity and innovation of interest for tourism.
- Create and enhance a tissue of cohesive structures and social and local integration. Cooperatives and associations should be the managers of tourism projects in the region.
- An administrative organization framework that incorporates local government in the planning and implementation of tourism projects. The collective will to participate in the same tourism development project is necessary, with a project that mobilizes the cooperation of all stakeholders in the logic of partnership, cooperation and flexibility.

Tourism in their integration into the local development system must pass through two main phases:

1. A first phase, corresponding to the initiation, where the tourism begins to depend on an organizational, technical and diversified production forecast, with the presence of intermediate technical and organizational boards. This leads to the densification of productive activities and structures of social cohesion.
2. Which would lead to a second phase, the consolidation one, with the development and emergence of sustainable tourism activities and the activation of assistance and investment at the level of intermediate technical and organizational boards. It would lead to the consolidation of a productive tissue for the local development.

Therefore, tourism and other productive activities can support each other and maintain an efficient local development dynamic. This integration of tourism activities could contribute to the development of products and other promotional activities. In the northeast of the Middle Atlas, In the northeast of the Middle Atlas it is verified that a paradoxical situation coexists that faces a potential based on natural and cultural heritage with an alarming precarious situation which affects both the environment and the population and the technical and organizational capital.

From this paradox arises a territorial and economic imbalance that explains, to a large degree, the gradual deterioration of the natural heritage. Living conditions remain below the expectations of the local population, reflecting an inadequate mobilization of local potential. This state of affairs explains the strong pressure on local territorial resources and on the natural heritage with the corollary of the progressive loss of this heritage, which reinforces the aforementioned imbalance.

It is necessary to enhance the tourist value of various territorial resources in search of local development, which should be based and be sponsored by different agents originating from both the institutional and private sector. The implementation of tourist activities must establish connections between the local population and the rest of the Moroccan territory as well as with the outside world.

Planning should be sought based on agreement and conciliation between operators affected by tourism development projects.

The State, local associations, local population and investors must work together to ensure the success of tourism planning with the common will to lead the economic development of the region and to obtain for local populations employment and supplementary sources of income.