

Dynamics of urban growth and challenges of territorial governance in Morocco: between challenges and perspectives

Dynamiques de croissance urbaine et enjeux de la gouvernance territoriale au Maroc : entre défis et perspectives

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of urban growth and the challenges of territorial governance in three major Moroccan cities: Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier. Drawing on a panel data set spanning the period from 2010 to 2023, we employ an econometric model using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method to examine the impact of multiple socio-economic variables on urban growth. The study primarily focuses on the role of local governance, public investment, unemployment, and access to basic services as key explanatory variables. Our findings highlight that territorial governance exerts a strong and statistically significant positive effect on urban growth. Similarly, public investments appear to be a powerful driver of urban development by stimulating infrastructure expansion and local economic activities. Access to essential urban services such as healthcare, education, and transportation also plays a vital role in enhancing urban dynamics and reducing spatial inequalities.

Conversely, the results indicate that high unemployment rates continue to constrain urban expansion, underscoring the importance of inclusive labor market policies. The comparison between the three cities reveals that Tangier, benefiting from large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Tangier Med Port, experiences a more dynamic urban growth compared to Casablanca and Rabat.

This research provides policy-relevant into the mechanisms of urban transformation in Morocco. It suggests that strengthening governance structures, improving coordination between territorial actors, and increasing investment in basic services are essential for sustainable and equitable urban development. The findings contribute to a better understanding of urbanization processes in the global south, and inform strategies to foster resilient and inclusive cities.

Keywords: urban growth, territorial governance, econometric model, Morocco, Moroccan cities.

Classification JEL: R11, R58, H70, O18, C23, R13

Paper type: Empirical Research

Résumé :

Cet article examine les dynamiques de croissance urbaine et les défis de la gouvernance territoriale dans trois grandes villes marocaines : Rabat, Casablanca et Tanger. S'appuyant sur un ensemble de données de panel couvrant la période de 2010 à 2023, nous utilisons un modèle économétrique utilisant la méthode des moindres carrés ordinaires (OLS) pour examiner l'impact de multiples variables socio-économiques sur la croissance urbaine. L'étude se concentre principalement sur le rôle de la gouvernance locale, des investissements publics, du chômage et de l'accès aux services de base comme variables explicatives clés. Nos résultats soulignent que la gouvernance territoriale exerce un effet positif fort et statistiquement significatif sur la croissance urbaine. De même, les investissements publics semblent être un puissant moteur du développement urbain en stimulant l'expansion des infrastructures et les activités économiques locales. L'accès aux services urbains essentiels tels que les soins de santé, l'éducation et les transports joue également un rôle vital dans l'amélioration des dynamiques urbaines et la réduction des inégalités spatiales.

À l'inverse, les résultats indiquent que des taux de chômage élevés continuent de freiner l'expansion urbaine, soulignant l'importance des politiques inclusives du marché du travail. La comparaison entre les trois villes révèle que Tanger, bénéficiant de projets d'infrastructure à grande échelle tels que le port Tanger Med, connaît une croissance urbaine plus dynamique par rapport à Casablanca et Rabat.

Cette recherche fournit des informations politiques pertinentes sur les mécanismes de transformation urbaine au Maroc. Il suggère que le renforcement des structures de gouvernance, l'amélioration de la coordination entre les acteurs territoriaux et l'augmentation des investissements dans les services de base sont essentiels pour un développement urbain durable et équitable. Les résultats contribuent à une meilleure compréhension des processus d'urbanisation dans le sud global, et éclairent les stratégies pour favoriser des villes résilientes et inclusives.

Mots-clés : croissance urbaine, gouvernance territoriale, modèle économétrique, Maroc, villes marocaines.

JEL Classification : R11, R58, H70, O18, C23, R13

Type du papier : Recherche empirique

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Morocco has endured rapid-fire and sustained urbanization, which has profoundly converted its territorial spaces and socio- profitable structures. This civic growth dynamic, while driving development and modernization, raises major planning, development and territorial governance challenges.

Major Moroccan metropolises similar as Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier play a central part in this metamorphosis, concentrating a significant share of the population, profitable conditioning and structure. Still, unruly growth, spatial inequalities, pressure on natural coffers and the complexity of relations between public and private players complicate civic operation.

Against this background, territorial governance is a pivotal factor in icing balanced, sustainable and inclusive civic development. This conception refers to the ways in which public authorities, profitable players and civil society cooperate and articulate in decision-timber.

Civic growth in Morocco has accelerated remarkably in recent decades, marked by rapid-fire and occasionally unruly urbanization. This dynamic acts major challenges in terms of land use planning, casing, socio- spatial inequalities and environmental sustainability. This composition presents an analysis of civic metamorphoses in Morocco, through a study of the main cosmopolites, the forms of urbanization observed, and the public programs and territorial strategies enforced. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the study aims to identify the regulators for further indifferent and sustainable civic governance. This composition analyzes the dynamics of civic growth in Morocco through across-cutting approach between the challenges of territorial governance and the prospects offered by recent institutional reforms. Using both a rich theoretical frame and an empirical analysis fastening on the metropolises of Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, this study aims to exfoliate light on the regulators probably to optimize the operation of civic homes in an environment of rapid-fire change.

Several studies have highlighted the link between governance and urban development in developing countries (Waston, 2009; UN-HABITAT, 2020), highlighting the importance of institutions, planning policies, as well as public investments in the structuring of urban spaces. However, in Morocco, research on these interactions remains rare, often limited to purely descriptive approaches (Belaid, 2018). There is therefore a lack of quantitative studies to empirically model the determinants of urban growth from structured data.

This study adopts a mixed approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis to gain a better understanding of urban growth dynamics and territorial governance in Morocco. The empirical analysis focuses on three major Moroccan cities: Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, which are representative of different urban, economic and political dynamics in Morocco. Two types of data were collected, primary and secondary: demographic and socio-economic statistics provided by the Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) and other official bodies, official documents relating to urban policies and territorial governance (development plans, laws, and government reports), academic articles and reports from international organizations (UN-Habitat, World Bank). Analytical methods are based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, the former involving statistical processing of demographic, economic and social data to understand urban growth trends, and the use of GIS (geographic information systems) for mapping and spatial analysis. And the second focuses on thematic analysis of interviews and documents to identify territorial governance practices and issues, and comparative case studies between the three cities to highlight local specificities.

2. Theoretical and empirical review of the literature

Urban growth refers to both the demographic and spatial expansion of cities. This phenomenon reflects a complex process resulting from multiple economic, social, political and environmental factors that interact on urban territories.

2.1. Theoretical and conceptual framework of urban growth

- **Urban growth:**

Urban growth refers to the quantitative increase in the urban population and the spatial expansion of conurbations. It reflects processes of demographic and economic concentration within cities, often involving the extension of built-up areas and a transformation of urban functions (Lefebvre, 1970; UN-Habitat, 2020).

- **Territorial governance:**

This concept goes beyond simple administrative management to include the coordination and participation of multiple stakeholders in the management of the territory. Territorial governance is based on institutional and relational mechanisms that ensure cooperation between the state, local authorities, private players and civil society (Healey, 1997; Pierre, 2000).

- **Sustainable urban development:**

Sustainable Civic development integrates social, profitable and environmental confines, in order to attune civic growth with the protection of natural coffers while perfecting the quality of life of occupants (Brundtland, 1987; Urban Agenda 21).

2.1.1. Fundamental theories:

- **Economic theories of the city:**

Central place proposition (Christaller, 1933) this proposition explains the scale and spatial distribution of metropolises according to their profitable functions and territorial influence.

- Agglomeration husbandry (Marshall, 1890; Krugman, 1991) these propositions show how the attention of profitable conditioning in metropolises generates positive externalities that boost productivity and invention.
- Alonso model (1964) emphasizes the trade- offs between land costs and domestic position within the civic structure.

- **Institutional and governance theory:**

According to Haeley (1997), civic institutions impact the way opinions are made in civic space. Civic planning is no longer just a specialized matter, but also a political and participatory bone. Governance becomes a negotiated process involving a diversity of players. Governance is grounded on participation, translucency and inter-institutional cooperation.

- Civic governance (Healey, 1997) the megacity is seen as a space for concession between multiple players.
- Multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks, 2001) emphasizes the commerce between public, indigenous and original situations in territorial decision- timber.
- Decentralization regionalization these processes impact the redivision of powers and liabilities among original authorities (Ribot, 2002).

- **Urban resilience theory:**

Urban resilience refers to the ability of urban systems to anticipate, absorb, adapt and recover after major disruptions, whether environmental, economic or social. It goes beyond simple

shock resistance and includes long-term adaptation mechanisms (Meerow, Newell & Stults, 2016). This theory is particularly relevant to understand how cities in the South, exposed to multiple vulnerabilities, develop adaptation and transformation strategies.

- **Theory of urban fragmentation:**

Urban fragmentation refers to the processes of division of urban space into unequally endowed territories, often marked by social, economic and functional segregation (Yiftachel, 2009). It allows analyzing the effects of metropolisation, gentrification or the development of residential enclaves on urban cohesion.

This critical approach is particularly useful for understanding the tensions between market logics, public policies and social dynamics.

- **Territorial approach and sustainable development:**

Civic space operation

- The adaptability of homes in the face of shocks (profitable, climatic and social)
- The significance of territorialized civic systems

It enables us to suppose of the megacity as a complex socio- spatial system (Dollfus, 1991; Lajarge, (2008);

Territoriality (Dollfus, 1991) the spatial dimension of governance is central. It involves thinking of the home as a socio- spatial system integrating profitable, social and environmental dynamics.

Civic adaptability (Vale & Campanella, 2005) the capacity of homes to absorb, recover from and acclimatize to shocks, particularly in the face of climatic and social challenges.

2.1.2. Positioning the analytical framework:

This theoretical framework allows us to cross-reference three fundamental dimensions in the study of Moroccan cities:

Table 1. Analytical framework increasing the economic, institutional and territorial dimensions of urban growth in Morocco:

Dimension	Questions asked	Approach mobilized
Economic	How do cities support growth?	Agglomeration economies, urban competitiveness
Institutional	Who are the players in urban governance?	Multi-level governance, institutionalism
Territorial	How is urban development specialized?	Territorial approach, resilience, sustainable urbanism

Source: Author's elaboration from scientific literature (Vale & campanella, 2005; Fox et al., 2018).

Through a comparative study of Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, this research aims to analyze how urban growth is framed, steered and sometimes constrained by national governance logics in Morocco.

2.2. Empirical review of the literature

The relationship between territorial governance and urban growth has been the subject of several empirical studies, particularly in emerging contexts. This work has often relied on panel data, composite indices or territorial indicators to better understand the drivers of urban expansion.

In a study of 75 cities in sub-Saharan Africa, Fox et al. (2018) used a panel data econometric model to demonstrate that the quality of local governance (measured by budget transparency and citizen participation) significantly influenced the ability of cities to manage population and spatial expansion.

Similarly, Henderson et al. (2013) have shown that in developing countries, cities with strong institutional structures experience better framed growth, thus reducing the negative effects of per-urbanization.

In the Maghreb, Bouraoui and Ghazzi (2021) analyzed the determinants of urban growth in Tunisia using a fixed-effect model. They conclude that access to basic urban services; municipal governance and public investment are key factors in the growth dynamics. Their approach highlighted the territorial disparities between coastal and inland regions.

Regarding the case of Morocco, empirical studies remain relatively limited, although some work is beginning to emerge. For example, Benhammou and El mouden (2020) explored the links between public investment and urbanization through an econometric analysis of large Moroccan cities. Their results suggest that the strategic orientation of territorial policies strongly influences the intensity of urban growth.

Furthermore, work carried out by institutions such as the HCP (2021) or the World Bank (2020) has used territorialized databases to identify the structural factors of urban growth in Morocco, focusing on land governance, the quality of infrastructure and decentralization policies.

These studies converge towards the idea that institutional framework and the quality of territorial decisions play a decisive role in the urbanization process. However, few quantitative studies jointly model governance, investment, basic services and socioeconomic factors in the same econometric analysis applied to Moroccan cities.

It is in this perspective that the present study positions itself, by proposing an integrated econometric approach which examines, over the period 2010-2023, the effect of several structural variables on urban growth in Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier.

The Moroccan framework: challenges and prospects

Morocco has undertaken several reforms aimed at improving territorial governance, including advanced regionalization (2015), the national urban development strategy and urban policy programs.

However, challenges persist, such as coordination between players, socio-spatial inequalities and financial constraints. National governance plays a crucial role in shaping urban dynamics. Through programs such as city policies, national housing strategies and advanced regionalization, the state attempts to regulate urban growth while meeting the demands of sustainability and social inclusion.

This study mobilizes these conceptual frameworks to understand the specificities of urban development in Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, highlighting the logics of public action and the territorial impacts of national policies.

The dynamics of urban growth, characterized by a continuing rural exodus, pressure on infrastructures and housing needs, require integrated territorial governance capable of articulating economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection.

3. Urban dynamics in Morocco: An overview

For several decades, Morocco has been undergoing a major urban transformation that is profoundly reshaping its territorial, social and economic landscape. This phenomenon of rapid urbanization is taking place against a backdrop of strong demographic growth, sustained spatial expansion of cities, and major economic and social changes. These urban dynamics, both a driving force for development and a source of multiple challenges, raise crucial questions about territorial governance, urban planning and social cohesion.

Demographically speaking, Morocco's urban growth is spectacular: the urbanization rate has risen from around 28% in the early 1960s to over 60% today, putting the country in an advanced phase of urban transition. This phenomenon is mainly the result of a dual process:

on the one hand, natural population growth, due to a high birth rate; on the other, a massive rural exodus fuelled by people's aspiration to benefit from the economic, educational and health opportunities offered by cities. This demographic concentration is taking place above all in major metropolises such as Casablanca, Rabat, Tangiers, Fez and Marrakech, where the country's economic and social dynamics are concentrated.

Rapid urbanization is accompanied by a significant geographical expansion of urban areas, often characterized by diffuse and sometimes anarchic per-urbanization. This spatial expansion generates a series of major constraints, notably in terms of excessive consumption of agricultural land, environmental degradation, the emergence of informal settlements and growing pressure on transport, water, electricity and social service infrastructures. These phenomena reveal the limits of conventional urban planning policies, highlighting the need for more integrated, sustainable and resilient strategies.

In economic terms, Moroccan cities play a central role as growth poles, concentrating industries, services and commercial activities. However, this economic dynamic is not without its challenges in terms of equity and inclusion. Urbanization is accompanied by strong socio-spatial polarization, marked by segregation between well-equipped neighborhoods and marginalized areas, often in precarious situations, accentuating social and economic inequalities.

Finally, urban governance is a key issue for the future of Moroccan cities. Despite the progress made in decentralization and the strengthening of local authorities, city management still faces difficulties linked to institutional fragmentation, weak citizen participation, and inadequate planning and resource management. National policies for sustainable urban development emphasize the need for more effective, inclusive and transparent governance, capable of harmonizing economic, social and environmental objectives.

The diagnosis of Morocco's urban dynamics reveals a dual reality: on the one hand, significant potential for development and modernization; on the other, multiple challenges that require increased mobilization of public, private and civil society players. Morocco's ability to meet these challenges will determine the future trajectory of its cities, between controlled growth, sustainable development and social justice.

4. Methodology

This section aims to empirically assess the determinants of urban growth in three major Moroccan cities: Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier.

Using an econometric model estimated on panel data (2010-2023), we analyze the effects of:

- *Urban governance*
- *Public investment*
- *Unemployment rate*
- *And access to basic services*

This approach enables us to confront theoretical hypotheses with territorial realities, and to provide a rigorous response to the problem posed.

4.1. Data sources

The data used come from several reliable sources:

- Haut-commissariat au Plan (HCP): urban population, unemployment, access to services.
- World Bank and OECD: data on governance and public spending.
- Local authorities: budgets, communal development plans.

Table 2. Explanatory variables:

variable	symbole	Type	Description
Urban growth rate	URB	Dependent	Annual change in urban population
Territorial governance	GOV	Independent	Synthetic index of local governance
Public investment	INV	Independent	Territorial public expenditure/capital
Unemployment rate	CHOM	Independent	Percentage of active population unemployed
Access to basic services	SERV	Independent	% of households with water, electricity, sewage

Source: elaborated by the authors on the basis of the data mentioned.

4.2. Presentation of the model

The choice of model is based on the nature of the data collected: a panel database covering three Moroccan cities (Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangiers).

Over a period from 2010 to 2023. This type of data makes it possible to capture both temporal variations (dynamic effects) and inter-city variations (city-specific effects).

After carrying out specification tests (notably the Hausman test), a fixed-effects model was selected. This neutralizes the unobservable time-constant effects specific to each city (such as institutional history or geographical location), which could bias the estimates.

4.3. Model specification

The estimated econometric model is as follows:

$$URB_{(it)} = \alpha + \beta_1 * GOV_{(it)} + \beta_2 * INV_{(it)} + \beta_3 * CHOM_{(it)} + \beta_4 * SERV_{(it)} + \mu_{-i} + \varepsilon_{(it)}$$

Where:

- $URB_{(it)}$: Urban growth rate for city i in year t
- $GOV_{(it)}$: Composite urban governance index
- $INV_{(it)}$: Urban investment expenditure per capita
- $CHOM_{(it)}$: Unemployment rate
- $SERV_{(it)}$: Rate of access to basic urban services
- μ_i : Fixed effects specific to each city
- $\varepsilon_{(it)}$: Random error term
- i denotes the city (Rabat, Casablanca, Tangiers), t the year

5. Results and discussion

Estimation was carried out using STATA 17 software.

Table 3. Fixed-effects model estimation results:

Variable	Coefficient(β)	Statistical significance	Interpretation
Governance (GOV)	+0.36	(p<0.01)	Significant improvement
Investment(INV)	+0.28	(p<0.05)	Moderate positive impact
Unemployment rate (CHOM)	-0.22	(p<0.1)	Negative impact
Service (SERV)	+0.41	(p<0.01)	Highly influential on growth

Source: developed by the authors from STATA output.

The model's results show that civic governance and access to public services are the main motorists of civic growth. The part of investment is also applicable, albeit to a lower extent. Severance, on the other hand, acts as a limiting factor.

These results confirm the suppositions formulated in the theoretical section. The results confirm that metropolises serving from participative governance, better institutional collaboration and transparent investment mechanisms achieve further sustainable civic growth. Tangier is a case in point, thanks in particular to the Tangier Med harborage and public-private hookups. In discrepancy, Casablanca shows the limits of fractured governance. The results show:

- *Territorial governance has a positive and largely significant effect on civic growth*
- *Public investment also promotes growth.*
- *Severance has a negative effect, decelerating growth.*
- *Access to services improves civic dynamics.*

These results suggest that civic governance programs and bettered introductory services are the most important regulators for civic growth.

• **Econometric tests:**

Table 4. Results of econometric tests:

Test	Result	Interpretation
Hausman test	$X^2=12.57, p<0.01$	Fixed effects preferable to random effects
Breusch-Pagan test	$P=0.27$	No heteroscedasticity
Wooldridge test	$P=0.18$	No autocorrelation
Overall R^2 coefficient	0.73	Good goodness of fit.

Source: compiled by the authors from STATA output.

Econometric tests show that the model is statistically robust:

- *Hausman test verified the applicability of the fixed- goods model.*
- *Breusch- Pagan test not significant, no heteroscedasticity.*
- *Wooldridge tests no autocorrelation.*
- *Overall R^2 0.73, demonstrating good model fit and attesting that the model does indeed explain variation in civic growth.*

Hausman test the fixed- goods model is preferred to the arbitrary- goods model ($p < 0.05$).

Heteroscedasticity test (Breusch- pagan) not significant, no heteroscedasticity.

Autocorrelation test (Durbin- Watson) close to 2, no serious autocorrelation.

The results validate the central thesis that effective civic governance (citizen participation, transparent planning, and institutional collaboration) simulates civic growth. This influence is particularly marked in Tangier and Rabat. Casablanca, on the other hand, is held back by centralization and patient civic inequalities. The results confirm that original governance and effective public programs play a decisive part in civic growth in Morocco. Decision- makers need to strengthen the quality of territorial governance and ameliorate access to services to foster sustainable development. Diving severance is also pivotal to boosting civic growth.

Public programs must thus concentrate on:

- *Inclusive territorial governance,*
- *Targeted investment in civic perimeters*
- *Improving social and service pointers to promote balanced civic development.*

The econometric analysis carried out on the cities of Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier highlights significant relationships between urban growth and variables such as governance, public investments and quality of services. However, it should be emphasized that these correlations should not be interpreted hastily as direct causal relationships. The model used, based on aggregated data, does not allow for a certain identification of the causal mechanisms at work. For example, effective local governance can promote urban growth, but the reverse may also be true: positive urban dynamics can attract better governance arrangements.

Moreover, the study does not take into account certain structural or contextual factors that strongly influence urban dynamics in Morocco, such as national planning policies, internal migration flows or demographic changes. These dimensions, although exogenous to the model, constitute essential elements for understanding the differentiated trajectories of urban development.

Another limit point lies in the chosen analysis scale. Based on global urban data, the study masks spatial disparities within cities, particularly socio-economic contrasts between central neighborhoods and peripheries or informal settlements. These intra-urban disparities are, however, crucial to guide targeted urban policies.

Moreover, the approach adopted remains essentially quantitative and does not involve other methods of analysis, such as field surveys, qualitative approaches or geospatial modeling. This limits the interpretative depth and explanatory scope of the results. Previous research in other contexts, such as in Brazil (Acioly & Davidson, 2020) or in South Africa (Turok, 2016), has shown the interest of combining methods to better understand the complexity of urban processes.

This analysis highlights the significance of the quality of civic governance and the indifferent provision of public services in civic dynamics. The results are clear metropolises that ameliorate citizen participation; institutional translucency and introductory structure perform better in terms of growth. This underlines the need to acclimatize public programs to original realities.

Discerned territorial governance, supported by targeted investment and addition mechanisms, is essential for sustainable urbanization in Morocco.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the econometric study provides a clear answer to the question posed: urban governance is a fundamental lever for growth dynamics in Moroccan cities. The differentiated impact between the three cities (Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier) demonstrates the need to adapt governance policies to local specificities. This study highlights that the quality of territorial governance and public investment are key levers for stimulating urban growth in Morocco's main cities.

These findings confirm that urban growth cannot be viewed solely in quantitative terms, but needs to be considered from a territorial, integrated and sustainable perspective. The major challenges lie in multi-level governance, anticipatory urban planning, combating spatial inequalities and environmental sustainability.

The results obtained call for a strengthening of participative territorial governance, better coordination between sectorial and territorial policies, and increased mobilization of investments in the service of inclusive, resilient and equitable urban growth. To meet urban challenges, better territorial coordination and targeted public policy are needed.

From a territorial perspective, the study reveals differentiated trajectories: Tangier shows rapid urban growth, largely driven by strategic infrastructure and openness to international investment; Casablanca faces more challenges related to spatial inequalities and urban congestion, while Rabat, as the administrative capital, exhibits more moderate but better-managed urban expansion.

The recommendations resulting from the results also appear relatively general. They would be more relevant if they were accompanied by differentiated scenarios according to the specificities of each city, taking into account land issues, multi-level governance and local institutional capacities.

Finally, the analysis does not take into account the diversity of stakeholders involved in urban governance nor potential conflicts of interest. In Morocco, the overlapping of powers between the state, local authorities and specialized agencies makes coordination particularly difficult

(Iraki, 2019). These tensions can constitute major obstacles to the effectiveness of urban development policies.

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