

# Morocco's Commitment to the Economic and Social Development of the Sahara

The economic and social development of the Sahara has been a [priority for the government](#) for the past three decades. It is a common misconception that the conflict in the Western Sahara is a war over resources. On the contrary, Morocco has invested a much greater sum of money [developing the provinces](#) than it has received from natural resource extraction.

## Economic Development

- In a November 2012 speech, King Mohammed VI charged the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE) with developing a [regional development model](#) for the Southern Provinces to boost the economy; consolidate social cohesion and promote culture; enhance social inclusion and consolidate the fight against poverty; ensure effective protection of the environment and sustainable territorial development; and define responsible, inclusive governance. Engaging all stakeholders, the CESE assessed the level and quality of access to basic human, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights in the southern provinces to best define the needs of the population.
- Over the course of 2013, CESE held meetings with more than 1,500 individuals, including elected officials, central and regional government authorities, civil society representatives, trade unions, and business leaders to develop recommendations for promoting economic growth, responsible governance, and greater local decision-making in the Southern Provinces. The [revised development model](#) adopted in December 2013 is based on key provisions enshrined in the Constitution, international conventions ratified by Morocco, and four principles: inclusive and sustainable human development; participatory governance; human rights; and rule of law. Several key recommendations to implement this new model include:
  - Promoting citizen participation and the rule of law through the creation of regional bodies for consultation and civil dialogue in an effort to bring all stakeholders into decision making processes;
  - Promoting investment and the creation of a business hub linking the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa in order to create 120,000 new jobs and double the region's GDP over the next 10 years;
  - Implementing a conditional cash transfer system targeting the most vulnerable populations to improve social safety nets;
  - Developing infrastructure, including strengthening of port, maritime, and air transport networks as well as electronic communications networks to improve access to the provinces; and
  - Advanced regionalization through the transfer of power to elected local and regional officials.

Toward these ends, the CESE called for an [investment of approximately \\$17 billion over 10 years](#).

- The CESE project builds on [longstanding engagement](#) to develop the region economically and socially. Since 1976, the Moroccan government has committed over \$2.5 billion to infrastructure and capacity building in the South. Its goal from the beginning has been to [develop the territory](#), particularly urban areas, by promoting economic development and establishing basic infrastructure, including roads, housing units, hospitals, and schools. These investments have achieved notable results. Urban living conditions [continue to improve](#), thanks to housing initiatives, the elimination of slums, and improved access to electricity and clean water.

- In March 2002, King Mohammed VI established [The Agency for the Promotion and Social and Economic Development of the Southern Provinces of the Kingdom](#) to oversee the development of the territory. The Southern Development Agency has promoted economic and social development by applying principles of good governance, ensuring that local, regional, and national actors establish partnerships and work together to address the needs of their communities. Through dialogue with local authorities, civil society representatives, diverse economic actors, and the mobilization of locals, the agency has been able to identify the needs of the citizens of the Southern provinces and tailored its development projects accordingly.
- For the 2004-2008 period, the [Southern Development Agency](#) was granted approximately \$900 million for 226 development projects along 7 axes: housing and urban development, fisherman villages and markets, water and environment, roads and infrastructure, tourism and craftsmanship, agriculture and breeding, surveys and feasibility studies.
- Several urban and rural communities in the south have also been specifically targeted by the [National Human Development Initiative](#) (INDH), established in 2005 to combat poverty and promote the conditions for social development throughout the country.
- The population of the southern provinces also benefits from tax breaks, low-cost or free housing, and subsidies on basic commodities.<sup>1</sup>

## Results

- The commitment of the government has [significantly transformed](#) the three provinces of the Sahara. In 1975, the region had the lowest rating for human development in the country. Nearly 50% of the population of the Sahara ranked below the poverty line, and illiteracy was rife. Today, the provinces have been completely transformed. Its human development rating ranks among the highest, as do its rates for education, health, literacy, and access to infrastructure. In 20 years, poverty diminished 66%, two times faster than at the national level.
- As a [result of this investment](#), the provinces now have two airports, four maritime ports, 10,000 km of roads, and a connectivity rate of 82% and 81% for water and electricity respectively. Significant projects have been completed, including the seawater desalination plant in Laâyoune, the Laâyoune power station, Dakhla harbor, and a new telecommunications station. This is in addition to the wide array of government buildings, health care facilities, stadiums, mosques, schools, libraries, theaters, and cultural centers the government has built in the region to improve the quality of life for the population.

## Social Development

- On September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Morocco held [historic elections](#) that advanced the process of devolving power to the local and regional levels as mandated by the reformed Constitution of 2011. For the first time, Moroccan voters directly elected representatives to their regional councils; and now both regional and local councils will have greater independence in managing and budgeting for their

---

<sup>1</sup> Thobhani, Akbarali. *Western Sahara Since 1975 Under Moroccan Administration: Social, Economic, and Political Transformation*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, p. 105.

respective affairs. Voter turnout was high—especially in the Southern Provinces—and citizens were engaged in the political process.

- The government has also made great strides in [promoting the social development](#) of the provinces. Starting in 1976, the government established a provincial department of education to enroll every child of 6 years and older in school and enlarge secondary and professional education. The significant investment yielded positive results; the percentage of children enrolled in school is 97%, the highest in the Kingdom. For youth ages 6-22, the rate is 77.5%, highlighting that in addition to primary education, the region is making great strides in secondary and university education. In addition, professional training initiatives have provided the region with well-trained professionals, particularly in the domains of construction, carpentry, electricity, and mechanics.<sup>2</sup>
- Also in 1976, the government began establishing health and medical services infrastructure by building hospitals, recruiting qualified personnel, promoting educational and vaccination campaigns, and distributing medicine. Currently, curative and preventative care is provided at minimal to no cost to the population and there is “little doubt that an effective health care infrastructure has been installed in the territory.”<sup>3</sup>
- Morocco’s economic initiatives and social protection programs in the South have consistently ranked the area ahead of [the rest of the country](#) in terms of human development.
- The impact of these initiatives goes far beyond the creation of houses, roads, or ports. These programs are specifically [designed to create steady jobs](#) in construction, strengthen the economic capacity of the population, spur local investment and the creation of small businesses, and have a long-term multiplier effect. They have contributed significantly to the formation and training of local officials, professionals, and civil society groups, ensuring that the region will continue to develop politically and economically.

### Resource Realities

- The Moroccan government is working under [serious environmental constraints](#) to promote the development of the Sahara. Fertile land for agriculture is limited to just 1.2% of the total land; and the regions of Sakia El Hamra and Oued Eddahab face severe climactic challenges, including drought and desertification.
- The most common misperception regarding resources in the Sahara region is that it is “[phosphate-rich](#)”. Phosphates are mined by the OCP Group, and the Phos-Boucraâ subsidiary represents approximately 6% of total phosphate sales for the OCP Group. Moreover, the Sahara region contains only 1.6% of Morocco’s known phosphate reserves.
- The OCP Group has [invested more in local economic and social development](#) than it has received from phosphate revenues. All revenues are reinvested in maintaining and developing the Boucraa mine and supporting regional social and economic activities.
  - The mine is the single largest private employer in the Sahara region.

---

<sup>2</sup> Thobhani, p. 136-151.

<sup>3</sup> Thobhani, p. 161.

- Over 78% of new hires are from the area and nineteen of the top executives including the leader of Phos-Boucraâ are from the Sahara region.
- OCP has spent millions on social, environmental, health, cultural, and job skills projects.
- OCP has allocated \$250 million for the societal development of the region over the next ten years (2013-2022), prioritizing youth employability programs, poverty reduction, health, and education.
- Over the same period, OCP allocated \$140 million for social infrastructure projects.

For more information, visit <http://www.moroccoonthemove.com/> - Follow on Twitter [@MorocOnTheMove](https://twitter.com/MorocOnTheMove)