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► **To cite this version:**

Pierre-Louis Mayaux, Max Rousseau. Hegemonic extractivism: mining, groundwater, and the closure of alternatives in Morocco. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 2026, pp.1-15. <10.1080/21622671.2026.2651327>. <hal-05605101>

**HAL Id: hal-05605101**

**<https://hal.science/hal-05605101v1>**

Submitted on 28 Apr 2026

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**Title: Hegemonic extractivism: mining, groundwater, and the closure of alternatives in Morocco**

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**Ethics statement :**

We confirm that all interviewees gave verbally their informed consent to be involved in the research and anonymously quoted in academic papers.

**HEGEMONIC EXTRACTIVISM:  
MINING, GROUNDWATER, AND THE CLOSURE OF ALTERNATIVES IN  
MOROCCO**

**Keywords**

extractivism – Morocco – hegemony – social conflicts – mines – groundwater – policy  
feedback – alternative development

**Abstract**

Many studies of extractivism emphasize the local resistances it provokes, showing how communities attempt to block expanding extraction frontiers. We argue that this focus has obscured a different political outcome: the consolidation of extractivism as a hegemonic development model in many territories. Drawing on the case of Morocco, we examine how such hegemony is produced and sustained. We show that governing actors reinforce extractivism not only through discourse, but through material policies that progressively foreclose alternative development pathways, generating durable policy feedback effects that narrow political and economic horizons.

Comparing phosphate mining and groundwater-based intensive agriculture, we demonstrate that mining generates more visible contestation due to the concentration of benefits, while groundwater extraction diffuses rents more broadly and remains less contentious. Yet in both cases, conflicts rarely challenge extractivism as such. They revolve instead around access to and distribution of extractive rents. We conclude by suggesting that the durability of extractivism

depends less on the absence of conflict than on the state's capacity to historically construct (or close down) credible alternatives.

## **INTRODUCTION: FROM CONTESTATION TO THE HEGEMONY OF EXTRACTIVISM**

### Encapsulating the conditions of extractivist hegemony

Extractivism refers to a mode of accumulation marked by high volumes of extraction of raw material, which are then exported with little or no processing. Compared to related concepts such as “dependency”, “re-primarization” and “commodity regions”, extractivism foregrounds the environmental destructions associated with large-scale commodity production, and its highly ‘negative impacts on the health and well-being of local residents (Chagnon, 2022). The suffix -ism also suggests the goal of maximizing benefit through extraction by any means available, which includes a willingness to use violence and other forms of coercion (Gudynas, 2009).

Over the last decade, the concept has left the mines of Latin America where it was originally forged to expand in two directions. The first one is thematic, with a profusion of adjectives appended to cover new domains, as in the case of "financial extractivism" (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017), "care extractivism" (Wichterich, 2020), "green extractivism" (Bruna, 2023) and "peri-urban extractivism" (Delage and Rousseau, 2025). The second one is geographic, with the application of the concept to the entire planet (Ye et al., 2019). Notions of “global extractivism” (Chagnon et al., 2022) and “hyper-extraction” (Watts, 2021) enjoin us to look at extractive territories not as idiosyncratic enclaves but as key links in “the planetary value chain of extraction” (Watts, 2021).

This conceptual expansion makes it possible to rethink extractivism in more systemic, politico-economic terms, and relate it to other global debates, including on the global (re)emergence of rentier capitalism (Piketty, 2014) and the respective merits of the notions of “anthropocene” and “capitalocene” to describe the current age of ecological turmoil (Moore, 2016). In short, from a practice limited to certain sectors (certain kinds of agriculture, mining and oil extraction) and regions (Latin America, BRICS), extractivism is considered today as an integral component of global capitalism, spreading its tentacles to new sectors and regions (Ye et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, many studies of extractivism have displayed a keen interest in the local resistances it arouses; how local populations attempt, in the face of extreme power imbalances, to block or slow down the advance of extraction frontiers. Oppositions may concern the social violence of extraction (including the violation of human rights and eviction of indigenous communities), its environmental destruction (deforestation, pollution, destruction of biodiversity), its economic costs (predatory capture of resources without local redistribution) or more likely a mixture of all three. This is the case, for instance, with the efforts by Bruno Manser and the Penan tribe to stop rampant deforestation in Sarawak, Malaysia (Dauvergne, 2016); and the campaigns by Chico Mendes and fellow rubber tappers to protect particular areas in Brazil from domestic and foreign extractive companies (Bratman, 2020). These oppositions have been dubbed “extra-activism”, both to denote the nature of their target and to highlight their “extraordinary” dimension, which has to do with their desperate character in such an asymmetric situation (Wapner, 2021). For many authors, in short, the globalization of extractivism implies the globalization of anti-extractivist protests (Kröger, 2020).

However, despite the rapid globalization of the concept, much of this influential theorization of extractivism and post-extractivism remains shaped by the original Latin American scholarship. Maybe as a consequence, the controversial nature of extractivism seems taken for granted and the conditions under which extractivism becomes politically vulnerable – or, conversely, hegemonic

– remain insufficiently theorized. Existing debates have provided rich accounts of socio-environmental conflicts, resource nationalism, and post-extractivist imaginaries. Yet they often take the emergence of anti-extractivist mobilizations as a starting point rather than as a puzzle to be explained. By contrast, this article shifts attention to the political and institutional conditions under which extractivism persists as a dominant development model despite mounting social and ecological costs. In doing so, we seek to contribute to broader debates on extractivism, state power, and territorial politics beyond any single regional trajectory.

~~In this paper, we argue that this focus on resistance, although commendable from a normative point of view, has had the problematic effect of downplaying the way extractivism can be, not only negotiated, adapted and accommodated locally, but also positively hegemonic.~~ Drawing from the case of Morocco, we highlight the strength of this hegemony, and explain it by the ability of governing actors, through their discourses but above all their policies, to make any alternative unimaginable: a case of strong “interpretative feedback” from public policies (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Sorelle, 2018). By comparing mining with groundwater-based intensive agriculture, we show that when conflicts do intensify -as is the case with mining- they are associated with demands for a better sharing of benefits, not demands for restricting extraction. In other words, they are conflicts *over* extraction rather than *against* it.

More generally, we argue that extractivism becomes hegemonic where and when two conditions are simultaneously absent: first, forms of economic polarization capable of generating broad and durable anti-extractivist coalitions; and second, credible regional diversification policies that render alternative development pathways institutionally grounded and socially imaginable. Where and when benefits are either highly concentrated but alternatives are lacking, or sufficiently diffuse to blur social divides, conflicts may arise yet remain confined to disputes over access to extractive rents rather than challenges to extractivism itself. In such contexts, public policies do not merely support extractive sectors materially: through long-term policy feedback effects, they

also shape expectations, identities, and political horizons, narrowing the space for anti-extractivist framing.

## **Methodology and structure: an in-depth investigation into a diagnostic case**

For our comparison, which brings together two main fields of extraction in Morocco, we pooled several years of research conducted by the two authors. One of the authors conducted fieldwork in the mining site of Khourigba, Jerada, Ben Guerir and Youssoufia. About 80 semi-structured interviews were carried out with the *Office chérifien des phosphates* (OCP, a state-owned phosphate rock miner, phosphoric acid manufacturer and fertilizer producer) executives and workers; *caïds*<sup>1</sup>, local politicians; state and municipal technical services; various civil society organizations associated with OCP or from civil society; trade-unionists, *hirak*<sup>2</sup> activists from Jerada and ordinary residents. The other author realized, over the course of seven years spent studying irrigation policies, a hundred semi-structured and unstructured interviews, including some informal unrecorded conversations, with agents from the agricultural department at different levels, irrigators, river basin agencies, *moqadems*<sup>3</sup> and donors. Most of his interviews

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<sup>1</sup> *Caïds* are local agents of the Ministry of the Interior. They work under the authority of a governor and operate at the level of a province (smaller than a region). They combine missions of administrative police (law enforcement, requisition of people or goods, securing public gatherings) and judicial police (documenting infractions, carrying investigative work and searching for perpetrators of crimes).

<sup>2</sup> The Rif *hirak* was a protest movement from the Rif region in the north of Morocco. It was sparked by the death, on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2016 in Al Hoceima, of a fish monger. He was crushed in a refuse vehicle while attempting to resist the police who had confiscated the swordfish he had caught at a time of year when it was forbidden. The protest movement amplified over several months and was eventually severely repressed in May 2017, when its leaders were jailed.

<sup>3</sup> *Moqadems* are agents paid by the Ministry of the Interior, although they do not enjoy the formal status of public servant, being only “auxiliaries of the administration”. They operate at the more local level (neighborhood, village). They report to the *caïds*, are in charge of social control and provide regular information to the Ministry. They are also an obligatory step for many bureaucratic procedures.

were conducted in three regions: the Chaouia, southeast of the Casablanca urban area (Berrechid, Settat); the vast agricultural plain of the Saïss, between the cities of Fes and Meknes; and the Haouz, near the city of Marrakech. In the case of Zagora, interviews were conducted during a field visit in April 2019 (Agd'z, Mezguita). Many ethnographic observations of the interactions between irrigators and state agents were also made during public meetings, expert workshops, and inside local agencies of the ministry of Agriculture.

This article deals with a sensitive topic on two counts, in an authoritarian regime like Morocco: an inquiry into a mode of development that is widely considered unsustainable, and therefore vulnerable to criticisms; and into the possibility of conflicts around this mode of development. Thus, while interviews were key sources for this paper, and although all interviewees gave verbally their informed consent to be involved in the research and anonymously quoted, we have opted to limit direct verbatim in order to protect our respondents. Finally, we want to stress that we approach Morocco as a “diagnostic case” (Lund, 2006) which allows us to question the prevailing discourse on the intrinsic conflictuality of extractivism. Rather than seeking a linear causality between extraction and resistance, we use the (near) absence of conflict as an empirical starting point to explore how public policies can lock in imaginaries, prevent the development of alternative local development models, and make extractivism hegemonic.

The paper is organized into four sections. First, we present extractive dynamics in both the mining sector and groundwater-based intensive agriculture in Morocco, highlighting some of the social ills they generate – thereby indicating that the absence of contestation of extractivism as such cannot be simply explained by the unmitigated good it would bring to local territories. Second, we show that public policies have foreclosed local alternatives to extractivism, and have over time rendered them unimaginable. Third, we show that conflicts in the mining sector, although intense, are not against extraction but over its terms, and illustrate this with the social protests around coal mines in Jerada. Fourth, we describe the social peace that prevails around

intensive agriculture in Morocco, despite the overexploitation of groundwater which it entails. We also look at one of the rare conflicts in which an anti-extractivist framing was effectively mobilized, against intensive agriculture in the desert region of Zagora, and highlight its exceptional character related to the existence of alternative pathways of local development. We conclude by inviting scholars of extractivism to take a closer look at how local alternatives are historically constructed or foreclosed by the state itself.

## **EXTRACTIVISM AND ITS SOCIAL ILLS: MINING AND INTENSIVE AGRICULTURE IN MOROCCO**

In Morocco, mining and intensive, export-oriented agriculture -the latter increasingly based on overexploitation of groundwater- have been core features of the national development strategy for decades (Swearingen, 1986). Thus, although this article purports to analyze the current hegemony of extractivism, it can only do so by placing current mining activities in a longer-term trajectory.

### **The mine and its exclusions**

In Morocco, the mining industry refers above all to phosphate mining. The OCP generates 30% of the total value of national exports. It operates in four large mining regions, including Khourigba and Youssoufia in the center of the country. Both towns were built when huge deposits were discovered by French settlers in the 1930s. They were soon tightly controlled by an omnipresent mining company based on the European model of a mining town. Independence and the “Moroccanization” of the OCP, as it came to be known, did not alter its key role in the urbanization of its territories: the company continued to plan urban development and house its employees.

In 2008, the OCP became a limited company (with the state holding 95% of the shares) and launched an investment plan designed to double its extracted volumes and triple its production of fertilizer. In 2016, it created a subsidiary to develop its activities on the African fertilizers market. Today, it is the main State company in Morocco.

Meanwhile, the number of inhabitants in mining towns has kept increasing since the major drought of the early 1980s, when informal neighborhoods mushroomed because of rural migrations. The segregation between formal districts, where OCP workers live, and informal districts, has started to become more rigid. These inequalities in the heart of mining towns have been compounded by the OCP's management decision to increase wages and reduce the workforce, a policy that was applied against a background of rising phosphate prices (Hibou and Tozy, 2020). This is consonant with a global trend: in contrast to other branches of the economy and to earlier periods of extraction, contemporary extractive industries are capital- and import-intensive: they generate little direct and indirect employment, but the jobs they do create are often comparatively well paid (Acosta, 2013).

Thus, the residents in Youssoufia now refer to the "Berlin Wall" to describe the railway line and the adjacent no man's land, which constitutes a border demarcating the two parts of the town. This territorial segregation, as we will see, embodies a shift in the forms of economic polarization and conflict in phosphate mining towns.

The OXP is also being accused of putting too much pressure on resources as a result of its activities, which use an estimated 1% of the country's water and 6% of its energy (Wagner, 2019). On a local level, the group faces some long-standing accusations: its employees and people living near its sites accuse it of polluting the water with fluoride, sterilize the soil and contaminate the air. These allegations are muffled in Morocco: the information is passed on by European publications (White, 2015; Swissaid, 2019).

## **"Mining" groundwater for intensive agriculture**

Over the last decades, intensive agriculture, which has been based on large-scale irrigation since the 1930s and, more decisively still, since the late 1960s, has partially shifted from overexploited surface water to groundwater - now increasingly overexploited as well. According to hydrogeologists, over-abstraction of groundwater applies to any situation where, over and above the ordinary annual fluctuations, water abstraction structurally exceeds an aquifer recharge rate. It was already apparent in some regions in the south of Morocco in the early 1970s. However, it increased substantially in the 1980s, at the same time as in other parts of the world because of improved drilling and pumping techniques, which greatly reduced costs for farmers (Kuper *et al.*, 2016). Initially, it was only a pragmatic response to the historic drought that occurred between 1981 and 1984. However, it soon became a fully-fledged strategy, geared towards high value exports: fruit plantations (citrus, bananas), dairy (irrigation of forage crops) and market garden crops under greenhouses. Although the export of Moroccan agricultural produce goes back to the French Protectorate and its “California dream” (Kuper *et al.*, 2023), it has steadily increased since the 1980s (Akesbi, 2014). Morocco has gone from “unmanageable self-sufficiency to determined extraversion” (Blanc & Brun, 2013: 130). The process culminated in 2012 with a trade agreement with the European Union setting out the liberalization of agricultural trade and fishery products<sup>4</sup>. Today, agriculture accounts for 12% of the gross domestic product (Morocco Business, 9 September 2024) and Morocco is the world's 5th largest exporter of citrus fruits. Europe is still the main market for these agricultural exports.

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<sup>4</sup> The export of fruit and vegetables generates foreign currency, which is used to import between 50 and 60% of the country wheat and sugar, and all of its maize.

As a result of the groundwater boom which has accompanied this development, more than 100.000 wells and boreholes provide water for 40% of the irrigated areas in the country, and contribute directly to 50% of the agricultural added value (Kuper *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, virtually all of the 107 aquifers of the country are affected by over-abstraction (Royaume du Maroc, 2018, p. 15). Officially, the volumes abstracted are already 25% higher than renewable volumes (4.34 billion m<sup>3</sup> compared to 3.41 billion m<sup>3</sup>). However, the real gap is probably much higher as these figures have not been updated since the mid-2000s. As a result, observers argue that groundwater is being “mined” (Akesbi, 2014: 12).

These dynamics generate considerable inequalities. Two main mechanisms are at work here. Firstly, the massive public subsidies which underpin this development are unevenly distributed. A survey conducted in 2009 in the Gharb region indicated that 94% of subsidies had been granted to a tiny minority of farms whose size always exceeded 10 hectares (Benouniche *et al.*, 2011). This distortion has various reasons, including complex administrative procedures; the difficulties of producing valid land titles; and smallholders’ historic mistrust of the Moroccan state, which contrasts with the close relationships that large farmers enjoy<sup>5</sup>. Groundwater abstraction is therefore a site of “collusive opportunism”. It echoes what Shah (2009) described in India, where government agencies and big landowners tacitly agree to favor the latter and squeeze out smaller farmers, thereby securing a “monopolization of opportunities” (Tilly, 2005).

Secondly, the continuous drop in the aquifer levels prompts the eviction of the most economically vulnerable farmers who cannot afford to dig even deeper wells, buy more powerful motor pumps, or cover energy costs. A number of small irrigators, by now heavily indebted, are forced to sell

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5 This mistrust is rooted in well-founded in historical reasons. For example, the Code of agricultural investments, promulgated in 1969, made it easy for the state to expropriate the land in the “public interest”, as long as it was justified by the need to improve infrastructure.

their land at a low price. The emergence of a “new category of waterless farmers” (Ameur, 2017) has been well documented in the Souss and Draa regions in the south of the country, in the large Saïss plain that stretches between the cities of Fès and Meknès, and in the central Haouz region of Marrakech (Mahdane, 2009 ; Ameur, 2017).

Groundwater over-abstraction is also associated with a number of adverse environmental impacts. It causes soil salinization and soil fertility losses. Between 2000 and 2010, 350.000 hectares of agricultural land were affected by salinity, which “severely reduced” their yields (MEMEE, 2010). Over-abstraction also causes land subsidence and facilitates the diffusion of pollutants in aquifers: 45% of groundwater is now of mediocre quality.

### **THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN (AND IN THE COUNTRYSIDE): THE HISTORICAL CLOSING DOWN OF ALTERNATIVES**

In contemporary political science, policy feedback denotes the potential for policies to transform politics and, as a result, influence future courses of policy development. Policies, in this view, are not just political objects; they are political forces that reconfigure the underlying terms of power, reposition actors in political relations, and reshape political actors’ identities, understandings, interests, and preferences (Mettler & Sorelle, 2018). The latter effects are termed *interpretive policy feedbacks*, whereby policies structure the “way individuals interpret the social world” (Pierson, 1993: 627). When these effects systematically entrench unequal resources and asymmetric power relations, they correspond to what Gramsci called hegemony, which operates through the dissemination of a “common sense” that delineates what is thinkable and imaginable in any given historical conjuncture (Gramsci, 1971). In this case, existing policies sustain the hegemony of extractivism by not sustaining any alternative. As a result, extractivism carries on because it is the *only game in town*.

## **No salvation beyond the mine: a long-term policy of neglect toward mining areas**

Compared to agriculture, mining operations require strong social and economic coordination, as demonstrated by the large mining companies that hold (or used to hold) a monopoly, not only of the pits, but of the whole organization of the mining territory (*company towns*). As they employ a concentrated workforce, employers were particularly vulnerable to strikes and to blocking freight trains (Mitchell, 2013). One of their classic responses was to compartmentalize the workforce, with the creation of several categories of jobs hermetic to each other (from miners to executives, to foremen). Colonial-era modes of labor management, which was maintained by the post-colonial company, extended into the town, which was constructed and managed by the mining company in a paternalistic fashion: access to districts with specific collective infrastructure has been restricted to statutory OCP cardholders up to these days. More generally, beyond the direct supervision of housing, schools and basic infrastructure (water, electricity) paternalism took the form of a fairly generous wage policy and the provision of social benefits, a rarity in Morocco. As summed up by Bogaert (2014: 134), “the OCP was virtually a state within a state. Working for the OCP was a privilege that was often passed from father to son”. The organization of the town and the compartmentalized nature of the districts was simply an extension of the way work was organized inside the company. Paternalism did not prevent classic industrial disputes about pay and working conditions. On the contrary, the two phenomena fueled each other. However, these disputes resorted to a repertoire of actions (ranging from strikes to union negotiations), which was clearly demarcated.

Despite the fact that mining areas have suffered from economic decline for quite some time, the Moroccan monarchy has not, to this day, promoted any alternative (re)development policies for these regions. Instead, it has relentlessly renewed its support for mining. The lack of

diversification policies means that for local residents, the prospects of finding a way out of extraction are simply not realistic.

In mining areas, the lack of public investments outside mining is a legacy of past policies. The French Protectorate (1912-56) put forward a fundamental distinction between what it labelled a “useful Morocco” and a “useless” one. Roughly speaking, this revived an older distinction between the *Bled el-Makhzen*, which covered territories that were directly under the sultan’s political authority, and the *Bled el-Siba* - territories belonging to dissident tribes, over whom the sultan had only religious and symbolic authority. During the colonial era, “useful” Morocco included all regions with fertile land, especially in coastal lowlands, and major port cities on the Atlantic coast, which provided governing functions and import-export interfaces. As this is where public investments were concentrated, development became polarized to the detriment of useless Morocco – areas of mountains, high plateaus and the arid region of the (south)east, with its supposedly unproductive economies. As political scientist Rémi Leveau remarked (1985: 7), “simply put, we could say that the French administration ensured the control of useful Morocco, leaving the notables to exploit the traditional rural world.” According to Abu-Lughod (1980), Morocco’s extremely unequal development is therefore, above all, the legacy of the Protectorate’s political project.

Today, the coastal megalopolis of Kenitra-Rabat-Casablanca-Al Jedida concentrates 75% of the urban population and 80% of Moroccan GDP. In contrast, the general situation in rural and mountainous regions is not improving and almost half of the rural population is living in conditions of extreme poverty (*Morocco World News*, 2018). The dual development policy led Naciri (1999) to conclude that the distinction between “useful Morocco” and “useless Morocco” is today as relevant as ever. In this context, mining towns were “useful” enclaves in the heart of useless Morocco until the 1980s. Their decline, or their modernization -depending on one’s point of view- brought local populations sharply back to the status of “useless”.

## **Massive support for irrigated agriculture**

After the 1980s and 1990s, which were marked by structural adjustment plans and market pressure to reduce public spending, the Moroccan state reasserted its developmental role in the agricultural sector. Since the mid-2000s, a “plan-rational” approach has prevailed again. It is typical of a goal-oriented, developmental state seeking to achieve high growth through the allocation of resources to designated economic activities (Haggard, 2015). A clear dimension of this massive reengagement was to encourage all farmers to abstract groundwater in order to increase their yields, using the highest volumes at least cost. In the areas concerned, public support for irrigated agriculture has no equivalent in other sectors. They make non-extractivist paths to development difficult for residents to imagine.

In 2002, a decree from the Ministry of Agriculture introduced subsidies of between 30 and 40% for digging wells and boreholes, buying pumps and making water storage ponds on plots of land (Molle, 2017). In 2008, the “Green Morocco Plan” (GMP) was launched, which, with a few modifications, continues to this day. It increased subsidies of up to 80% for farmers wishing to switch to drip irrigation, a technology widely considered to be more efficient<sup>6</sup>. Small landowners with less than 5 hectares even received 100% subsidies. In addition to these massive benefits, public policies also provided certified seeds and funded the export of water intensive crops like citrus, tomatoes or soft fruit. The GMP stated ambition was to initiate a “revolution in irrigated agriculture, its productivity and competitiveness” (El Gueddari and Arrifi, 2009). According to official figures, the average income of farmers quadrupled between 2008 and 2015, at a cost of some 90 billion dirhams of public investments (about 9 billion euros) (Challenge, 2016). At the

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<sup>6</sup> The national plan to save irrigation water (PNEEI), included in the Green Morocco Plan, aimed to spend 37 billion dirhams (about 3.7 billion euros) before 2020 to convert 550 000 hectares of land to a localised irrigation system, deemed more efficient in terms of water use.

same time, regulations governing the depth of wells and volumes of water pumped, theoretically set out by law, were rarely applied (Mayaux, 2021). Moroccan authorities thus made the resolute choice of an extractivist model, opting not to use public resources allocated to GMP to support more environmentally-friendly, less water-intensive agricultural practices. Subsidies could have been granted to less water intensive crops, or crops that are better adapted to regional rainfall patterns; compensation could have been allocated to farmers who reduce their water use; and funding could have been provided for infrastructure that artificially recharge aquifers. However, this type of transition was always likely to cause drops in income for large farmers, at least in the short term.

With regard to a potential transition to other economic sectors, this appears even more unlikely as most land was dedicated to agriculture well before the massive abstraction of groundwater: groundwater use has simply intensified an long-standing agricultural tradition, e.g. in the Souss or the Saïss. Given the lack of attractive alternatives, farmers with the means to do so tend to exploit aquifers until they become inadequate for agriculture (e.g. extreme salination of coastal aquifers) or until their plot of land can be urbanized, which generally comes with a valuable windfall, such as in the hinterland of Casablanca (the case of the Berrechid Aquifer) or Marrakech.

## **CONFLICTS *OVER* EXTRACTION IN THE MINES**

Although it has morphed in recent decades, a clear boundary between winners and losers still prevails in the mining industry. This explains the permanence of high-intensity conflicts since the formation of dichotomous collective identities setting “them” against “us” is an essential

prerequisite for collective action (Tilly, 2005)<sup>7</sup>. In the mining sector, these borders are now territorial and set the “natives” against “profiteers” who are perceived as allogeous. However, due to the perceived lack of alternatives, these conflicts do not take the form of protests against extractivism, but over its terms.

### **From industrial disputes in the mines to regional conflicts around the mines**

Since the 1980s, against a backdrop of then falling phosphate prices, the OCP set out to extricate the company from industrial conflicts. Different strategies were adopted, including subcontracting, automation and the fragmentation of industrial sites. These processes gradually redrew the borders between the winners and losers of mineral extractivism. The number of losers multiplied with the gradual disappearance of the social reproduction in the *company town*, and increasingly coincided with a large majority of residents of the territory. In Youssoufia, the OCP now only employs 2.000 agents, compared to 13.000 in the 1970s<sup>8</sup>. New generations no longer benefit from the situation enjoyed by their elders: retired miners still benefit from the company’s generous pensions, but watch powerless as living conditions become more precarious for their children, who struggle to find a job at a subcontractor. The latter are often left with an unpalatable choice between unemployment, rural exodus, and emigration whose fate appears increasingly uncertain due to the harsh migratory restrictions implemented by European countries.

This deterritorialization of profits, whereby surplus value is extracted from the territory without being reinvested there, is compounded by the gradual withdrawal of the company from urban management. The districts previously managed by the company are now handed over to the

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7 As also pointed out by Charles Tilly (2005, chap. 9), the specific contours of these collective identities are constantly evolving, since incessant "cross-border interactions" can lead to their reinforcement, renegotiation or displacement.

8 Interview, municipal council, November 2017.

municipality. This changes the forms of conflict with the OCP, which is attempting to respond by reactivating selective forms of paternalism, especially to ease the tensions after the major protests which erupted in 2011 - a Moroccan version of the “Arab spring”.

The territorialization of mining conflicts is in line with a similar shift taking place on a national scale. During the 2000s, “peripheral Morocco” saw the proliferation of local protest movements, which were all managed politically by “swinging to and fro between sanctions and concessions” (Bennafla and Emperador Badimon, 2010, p. 84). The list is virtually endless and includes protests in Tamassint (2004), Al Hoceima (2005), Bouarfa (2006), Sefrou (2007), Sidi Ifni (2008), Beni Mellal (2009), Sidi Bouafif (2010), Imider (2011), Youssoufia (2011), Khourigba (2011), Taza (2012), Al Hoceima (2016), Jerada (2018), etc. (Zaki, 2008; Guennoun, 2010; Aziki, 2011; Bogaert, 2014). Bennafla and Emperador Badimon (2010: 69) have remarked that “most hotbeds of social protest are untouched by regional development policies and located beyond the perimeter covered by the three public agencies for regional development. The agencies’ jurisdiction covers 75% of Moroccan territory, but leaves out the country’s central highlands”. This evolution is part of a more general tendency: the surge of Moroccan conflicts in declining territories. Until the 1980s, large cities, their students and their workers were at the center of social conflicts, which revolved around demands for democracy and social redistribution (Daoud, 2006). However, since the 2000s, many protest movements have emerged in the Moroccan hinterland (Bennafla and Emperador Badimon, 2010). In the context of a lack of alternatives, the case of the conflict in the Jerada mine provides a good illustration of the “pro-extraction” character of many social mobilizations in the country.

### **A conflict for a better extraction: demands for reintegration and dignity in Jerada**

The case of Jerada is typical of the marginalization of mining areas and the demands for reintegration that stem from it. Located in a genuine cul-de-sac since the closure of the border with Algeria in the 1990s, the region now has little strategic value and state investments are more

minimal than ever. It has suffered from continuous decline, which the state controls *a minima* with what Troin describes as “compensations” (Troin, 2000). This involves the creation of new “prefectures” in Jerada – a local unit of intervention for the State, coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior- and in the nearby town of Bouarfa, after the depletion of the manganese deposits. Jerada itself was built around a coal mine that officially closed in 1997. Since then, it has suffered from a long process of impoverishment and demographic decline. Beyond the town itself, the whole province is in decline after the closure of mines and associated industries: the Moroccan collieries in Jerada, Touissit, Zelidja and Sidi Boubker, and a lead foundry in Oued El Heimer. The town and its province do not benefit from any metropolitan effect, since the nearest large city is Oujda which has itself been in crisis since the Algerian border closed. Jerada hardly benefits from clientelist redistribution either as the town only has a small local elite, with no powerful national connections.

Since the early 2000s, the state has implemented a policy to “upgrade” the area, which has largely involved measures on the built environment (improving roads, extending public lighting, etc.). While this benefitted the local construction industry, which enjoys close ties with the local elite, it failed to meet expectations in terms of jobs. Today, the residents of Jerada largely survive in three ways: smuggling; receiving money transfers from relatives in Europe (mostly Italy); and informal mining, which is worth a closer look.

The coal mine official closure in 1997 did not actually mean the end of mining. However, the informal mining that took over was organized very differently: 2.000 clandestine miners, without union protection, were now at the mercy of an oligopoly made of a handful of local entrepreneurs selected by the state. Three years after the Moroccan collieries ceased their operations, the ministry of Mines granted authorizations to a few local businessmen for coal mining and distribution. Miners were forced to sell the product of their labor at a price fixed by the cartel, which then handled marketing downstream. The system is entrenched at different government

levels (municipality, province, region and parliament), by these entrepreneurs who are locally known as “barons”. Miners now work with no formal status, which puts them in a situation of extreme dependence. They work in small teams, digging their own pits deeper and deeper which implies increasing risks. Those we interviewed explained that the fact that there is “no alternative” in the region means that they are condemned to an early death<sup>9</sup>.

In recent years, a rising number of deaths at the bottom of illegal pits has exacerbated social tensions, until the death of two young miners in December 2017 sparked a major protest. The movement did not demand an end to mining, but protested against the deterioration in work conditions (for example, there was a demand for funding miners’ equipment as they are currently reduced to digging pits of up to 60 meters with simple picks). Local protesters also criticized the way the state has “abandoned” the town and demanded “economic alternatives”. International media coverage forced the state to react swiftly. Its response essentially involved repressing the leaders of the movement, combined with an attempt to regain control of informal mining by setting up formal cooperatives. A more innovative approach attempted to encourage young miners’ career change, by setting up irrigated farms for them in the surrounding region. It is still too early, however, to tell whether this diversification strategy has been successful (preliminary indications are that this “back to the land” initiative runs against serious limitations).

Generally, authorities are trying to respond at the lowest possible cost to these demands for reintegration, without committing themselves to development strategies that would offer an alternative to mining. In Youssoufia, during the Arab Spring in 2011, protestors targeted the mining company, demanding jobs. The OCP responded by reactivating paternalistic modes of management, which continued during the later *hirak* of the Rif: the company launched a plan to recruit 6.000 miners’ sons and other young people from the region, coupled with a training

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with informal miners, Jerada, June 2018.

program for some 15.000 young people. Despite accusations of clientelism over the selection of beneficiaries, this response did bring back a measure of social peace, albeit tenuous. The persistent climate of tension – daily *sit-ins* for access to jobs, water and equipment – is also contained in Jerada by a highly visible police presence and a meticulous lockdown by *moqadems*.

## **ALL QUIET ON THE IRRIGATION FRONT, WITH A FEW EXCEPTIONS**

Contrary to what can be observed in mines, intensive agriculture has so far generated benefits that, while uneven, are more disseminated and less concentrated than in mining. In the context of a lack of alternatives, this has engendered social peace and an acquiescence to extractivism that is even more pronounced than in the mines.

### **Social peace and the diffusion of benefits from intensive agriculture**

So far, the social suffering around irrigated agriculture has not triggered social conflicts of any magnitude. Observers notice how much the victims of over-abstraction remain “silent” (Kuper *et al.*, 2016, p. 13). Thus, although the “over-abstraction of groundwater often has drastic consequences, even in the short term, the actors react individually” (Bekkar *et al.*, 2009, p. 606). Social organizations with limited resources, like Attac Maroc, have tried to politicize the issue by criticizing “Morocco’s dependence on an export-oriented agricultural policy rather than self-sufficiency, [which] means depleting water resources” (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2020). But they have not had much success and, so far, no social coalition has formed in favor of putting limits to water abstraction (Faysse *et al.*, 2012). In addition to the absence of alternatives, this relative

social peace can be explained by the dissemination of the benefits of intensive agriculture, which prevents the formation of a clear social divide between winners and losers.

In Morocco, there is no up-to-date public data on farm structure<sup>10</sup>. The last public census dates from 1996. It revealed that agriculture was largely based on family farming: 94.6% of farms did not have a permanent workforce, one of the most commonly used criteria to distinguish family farms from agricultural businesses<sup>11</sup>. The perpetuation of a large number of family farms, which contrasts sharply with other North-African countries, is linked to a specific social compromise, which was forged after independence between the Moroccan monarchy and the rural world. The rural elite were allowed to capture disproportionate benefits from public investments in hydraulic works and irrigated farming. In exchange, however, they were expected not to abuse their dominant position and to cultivate rural support for the monarchy, while slowing down rural migrations (Leveau, 1985).

As a consequence, the massive abstraction of groundwater is currently practiced by several hundred thousand farmers, who usually own less than 5 hectares of land (Dugué et al., 2014). This family farming does not prevent the steady intensification of water use, which is often associated to export value chains. Resorting to casual farm labor is widespread and families diversify their skills in order to intensify production: recruitment and supervision of casual workers, securing chemical inputs, marketing, accessing extension services and State subsidies, etc. In so doing, they develop an “entrepreneurial” family model characterized by specialization, economies of scale and the artificialization of the environment (Van der Ploeg, 2014). This contrasts with many academic characterizations of family farming and the social representations

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10 The results of the last agricultural census, conducted in 2016, were not made public.

11 These include both agricultural companies held by shareholders and farms belonging to one family. Both types use considerable amounts of capital (land, labor, equipment and inputs), entertain a permanent workforce, including managers, and have a large area of cultivated land (typically > 50 ha).

that go along with it, which foreground low input use, highly diversified crop systems and selling at a local market.

Unlike the mining sector, the dynamism of this small-scale extractivism is such that there is no clear social divide between winners and losers of agricultural extractivism. Individual situations are diverse and evolving. Interdependence between smallholders and “agribusiness” is manifold. For example, people working on large farms are often family farmers themselves, who pass on agricultural know-how in both directions. Large foreign companies have a visible presence, e.g. in the olive or fruit sector, but there is little direct appropriation of land, unlike for example in Latin America (Blanc & Brun, 2013). Finally, it is important to draw attention to the large number of intermediaries -who ensure the transport and marketing of agricultural produces- who help sustain irrigated regions (Lejars *et al.*, 2017).

There is also no clear boundary between “native” farmers and outsiders, even though internal agrarian migration is widespread. The case of the Berrechid aquifer provides a good illustration of these complex entanglements rather than sharp divisions (Ouassissou *et al.*, 2019). Located a few dozen kilometers to the southeast of Casablanca, this aquifer has been used for the past 20 years to irrigate -mostly- potatoes and carrots, which are increasingly exported to West Africa in addition to Europe. It is still physically fairly accessible (between 40 and 60 meters deep) but its level has dropped by 15 meters on average, which portends “a disastrous situation in the medium term” (Royaume du Maroc, 2010: 88).

Opposition between natives and outsiders is occasionally mentioned by interviewees<sup>12</sup>. They differentiate between “*ouled lbled*” (literally the “sons of the territory”, who claim to descend

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12 These observations are based on ten interviews conducted in December 2018 and April 2019.

from the large tribe of the Ouled Hriz<sup>13</sup>), who would have more legitimacy to use “their” aquifer, and the “*baranis*” (“foreigners”) who have invested since the 2000s by renting land. This distinction is commonplace in rural areas in Morocco. It conveys a more general suspicion of the erosion of social control that is perceived to be caused by the arrival of people from outside local tribes. In addition to “foreigners”, the latter are also described, quite pejoratively, as “nomads” (Quarouch, 2011). It is not hard to imagine that the *ouled lbled* could use this distinction to blame the *baranis* for being solely responsible for over-abstraction, which would cause a lasting social divide, and potentially some enduring conflicts (c.f. Tilly, 2005). Yet, in practice, the local situation is so entangled that this kind of division does not hold. Many farmers, who come from the area, are associated with outsiders, who provide them with funding for inputs and labor (Ouassissou *et al.*, 2019). Partnership agreements, which used to be merely verbal but are increasingly formalized in writing, form the basis for a mutually beneficial exchange. In addition to providing financial resources, outside investors are more familiar with marketing channels for vegetables in the Casablanca conurbation and also internationally, as they are in closer contact with retailers and supermarkets. For their part, the local farmers have all the know-how required for production in this particular region.

Not everyone, to be sure, benefits from these cooperations. Losers include many local farmers who also raise livestock and still depend exclusively on rain-fed farming. Their livestock graze land after the cereal harvest (as they do not have sufficient financial resources or land), but these areas are reducing because of the expansion of irrigated areas. Their shallow wells, used for watering their livestock, are drying up because of over-abstraction in the vicinity. They are very unhappy about their lot and readily blame the *baranis*. They accuse them of “sucking their water”

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13 Belonging to the confederation of the Chaouias (the name of the region in which Berrechid is located), the Oulad Hriz claim to have special prestige since they fought the French in 1907. They then succeeded in temporarily dislodging the French from Casablanca, a few years before the Protectorate was eventually established.

(Ouassissou *et al.*, 2019, p. 5). Nonetheless, the fact that their close neighbors are associated with the same *baranis* makes it complicated for them to turn these discontents into effective protests. As one livestock farmer explained:

“Groundwater is increasingly rare, but we can’t protest against these tenants because some *ouled lbled* have a good understanding of irrigated crops and work in partnership with them to obtain inputs and equipment, and other local farmers benefit by renting out their land and their wells in order to meet their daily requirements<sup>14</sup>”.

Social inequalities thus emerge only indirectly, without corresponding to any clear-cut dividing line. The massive abstraction of groundwater generates benefits that are diffuse enough to prevent the crystallization of a regional identity around a common environmental cause such as the preservation of local water resources. One exception is the case of the Zagora protests. Its exceptional nature, however, only proves the rule of the hegemony of extractivism.

### **An exceptional case of anti-extractivism: the “thirsty” protests of Zagora**

Zagora is a town of some 60.000 inhabitants located in the southeast of the country, nestled in the heart of the long oasis belt that constitutes the Draa Valley. A large-scale protest broke out in the autumn of 2017, which exceptionally challenged the very legitimacy of the irrigation boom which developed in the region since 2008, with the rapid spread of watermelon cultivation in the vast plain adjoining the city (Feija). Zagora watermelons have proved to be very successful export crops (exported to Europe and West Africa) as they reach maturity ahead of most of their competing regions. However, they are also highly water intensive<sup>15</sup>. Several wells which used to provide drinking water to some neighborhoods and surrounding villages have dried up as a result.

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14 Cited in: Ouassissou *et al.*, 2019: 7

15 Sixty litres of water are required to produce a single watermelon.

The crop has also caused “exponential” environmental damage as watermelon production sterilizes soils, which are then abandoned, leaving the plastic used to cover plantations littered on the ground (*L’Economiste*, 2015).

In response, many residents in Zagora organized “thirsty protests” in the autumn of 2017 (*Dissent*, 2018). Exceptionally, they did not simply demand a short-term solution for their drinking water supply, but also criticized the “unsustainable” agricultural model (*Libération*, 2019). They thereby advanced an anti-extractivist framing which challenged the very legitimacy of maximum extraction of water, as well as the underlying development model; therefore challenging, as any anti-extractivist framing does, not underdevelopment but “poor development” (Svampa, 2011: 105).

To be sure, and much like what happened in the mines, the protests were fueled by clear economic polarization. Most of the beneficiaries of the watermelon boom have arrived recently from outside the region (mainly from the Souss), which has caused a very apparent divide between natives and outsiders. These outsiders have no family ties in the region, nor do they reinvest their profits there. They are perceived as a group quite separate from Zagora’s traditional tribes and from the small farmers in the surrounding oases. This discourse about appropriation by *barani* echoes the contemporary reiteration of a decolonial political discourse in Latin America, in which the massive extraction of natural resources is assimilated to the historical pursuit of the colonial project (Cusicanqui, 2007). In the case of Zagora, colonialism was experienced as internal rather than external.

However, what explains that protests took an anti-extractivist turn - instead of being only over the terms of extraction as in the mines- was the perceived viability of alternative pathways of local development. In Zagora, unlike other rural areas, policies of economic diversification have been effectively pursued by the Moroccan state. They focus primarily on developing local produces (henna and dates) and oasis tourism. They have helped cultivate an “oasis imaginary” of

development in the zone, comprised of selective, agroecological value chains and sustainable tourism, in relative harmony with the environment (Kuper & al., 2023).

As they directly challenged a mode of accumulation that benefitted powerful and politically well-connected investors, protesters were met with heavy repression. Protests ended with the arrest of 23 demonstrators, 14 of whom received prison sentences. This led one of them to ask “whether we are really human beings, since we are treated like this” (*Dissent*, 2018). Beyond repression, however, a demineralization water plant was also constructed for the town, which purifies brackish waters from other catchment areas in the region. This solution has not ended discontent: the water is of dubious quality and does not supply small farmers, who have had to dig deep wells with unreliable results. In a new effort to reduce local tensions, the governor of the region decided in 2022 to limit the cultivation of watermelons to a maximum of one hectare per farmer, and banned it altogether in catchment areas for drinking water. The following year, the destruction of watermelon crops that did not comply with these new regulations was ostentatiously undertaken by the local authorities (Bladi.net, 1 February 2024).

This anti-extractivist framing was not without its blind spots, however. Not far from Zagora, groundwater over-abstraction is drying out palm groves as well, which threatens Zagora tourist operators as much as many “native” producers. By one-sidedly embracing the oasis imaginary of development, protestors have also downplayed the issue of water consumption of date palms (which can be as high as for watermelons), feeding the image, factually debatable, that extractivism would only be a problem caused by “outsiders”.

## **CONCLUSION: IS MOROCCO’S ECOLOGICAL COLLAPSE INEVITABLE?**

While the extension of extractivism at a planetary scale is generally equated with a globalization of socioenvironmental conflicts (Kröger, 2021), the Moroccan case invites us to nuance the

assumption that extractive expansion necessarily generates anti-extractivist coalitions. Despite mounting inequalities and severe ecological degradation, opposition in Morocco rarely targets extractivism as a development model. ~~the burgeoning research trend that focuses on local opposition to extractivism has had the effect of downplaying the hegemony enjoyed by extractivism in many settings, while being too quick to associate conflicts, when they do occur, with protests *against* extractivism. Morocco appears as a relevant “negative” case study here, with very little opposition to extractivism as such, even as it engenders high inequalities and serious social and environmental damages.~~

~~This case study therefore invites us to nuance the hypothesis of a globalization of anti-extractivist mobilizations. This is because, as we purported to demonstrate, anti-extractivist protests can only arise where there are credible alternatives for local development, and these alternatives are often supplied by other state policies which is not the case in Morocco, where diversification policies remain marginal. Extractivist policies, when they predominate past a certain point, generate interpretive feedback effects: they limit what is socially conceivable, reduces opportunities for anti-extractivist framing, and reinforce the local hegemony of extractivism. Approaching Morocco as a diagnostic case in the sense proposed by Lund (2014), this article has sought to identify mechanisms through which extractivist hegemony is reproduced. We have argued that anti-extractivist mobilizations are unlikely to emerge where (and when) two conditions are absent: strong forms of economic polarization capable of sustaining broad coalitions, and credible diversification policies that render alternative development pathways materially and institutionally viable. In such temporal and regional contexts, conflicts may proliferate, but they remain confined to disputes over access to extractive rents rather than evolving into systemic critiques of extractivism itself.~~

The Moroccan trajectory also highlights the central role of public policy in this process. Extractivism persists not only because it delivers rents to powerful actors, but because state

policies generate long-term feedback effects that entrench material dependencies and narrow political horizons. Through sustained investment in mining and irrigated agriculture, coupled with the marginalization of diversification strategies, governing actors have contributed to making extractivism appear as the only realistic pathway for territorial development. Hegemony, in this sense, operates less through the absence of conflict than through the structured closure of alternatives.

More generally, our analysis calls for greater attention to the interplay between territorial inequality, state strategy, and policy feedback in shaping the politics of extraction. Rather than assuming that socio-environmental degradation will automatically translate into resistance, scholars should examine how local and regional development policies structure the field of the thinkable and the feasible. In many contexts beyond Morocco, particularly those marked by authoritarian resilience, uneven development, and selective state intervention, extractivist hegemony may rest less on coercion than on the historically sedimented absence of credible alternatives.

Does this mean that such a vicious circle is unstoppable, and that, in this case, Morocco ecological collapse<sup>16</sup> would be imminent (Petit *et al.*, 2017)? This dystopian scenario should not be discarded. However, the Moroccan case also suggests that the political conditions of extractivist hegemony are locally and historically produced and therefore potentially reversible. For example, where and when limited diversification policies have been introduced, as in Zagora, they have helped sustain alternative imaginaries and enabled anti-extractivist framing, even if fragile and heavily repressed.

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16 The notion of *collapse* brings us back to the hypothesis, which suggests that the ecological crisis is bound to cause systematic non-linear social effects, including the sharp reduction in the state's capacity to govern society (Diamond, 2005).

Building on this highlighting of the key role of public policies in the emergence of anti-extractivist protests, we may therefore imagine a different scenario: a scenario in which the introduction of initially limited reforms (targeting economic diversification in some regions) would help redefine people's expectations and trigger more anti-extractivist movements. This would, in turn, generate a more productive dialectical dynamic whereby protests would force Moroccan governing actors to gradually move away from an ever-intensifying extraction of raw materials and natural resources.

As a step in the right direction, the Special Commission for a New Development Model, which was set up by the Moroccan government in 2019 and submitted its conclusions in April 2021, recommended that “anticipating externalities in any environmental project should be systematic, and public policies should prioritize the protection of resources in the event of strong negative externalities” (2021: 67). However, the fragility of a scenario of gradual bifurcation must be acknowledged, so central is extractivism in the reproduction of the socio-political order in Morocco. It ensures that elites of different kinds keep accumulating capital. It is also an arena of aspirations for broader sections of the population, and therefore a mechanism for producing consent. This is probably not a coincidence, then, that mining itself is never mentioned in the aforementioned report.

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