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Territorial Attractiveness of Tourist Destinations in Morocco: Case of the Atlantic Great South Tourist Territory

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Abstract:

This article highlights the characteristics of the Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab region and the achievements reached under the impetus of the developmental policies deployed by the public authorities recently, especially after the COVID-19 crisis. Our work first presents the concept of attractiveness in general and the attractiveness of tourist destinations in the era of COVID-19 in particular. Secondly, the focus is on the potentialities of the Atlantic Great South tourist territory and the perspectives of post-COVID-19 recovery. The Atlantic Great South tourist territory is a rich area with its pleasant climate, natural resources, various Saharan fauna and flora, making it one of the most attractive regions of the Kingdom, especially Dakhla as a modern tourist and industrial city. Despite the obvious efforts made at the level of the previous territory, these achievements remain insufficient, hence the territorial actors must undertake other actions. The southern regions of the Kingdom are following an accelerated pace of economic development; the tourism sector, closely correlated to the economy, must therefore benefit from this opportunity by spillover effects to ensure the development of tourism in the region.

Keywords: territorial attractiveness, competitiveness, tourism, COVID-19.

摩洛哥旅游目的地的地域吸引力：以大西洋大南旅游区为例

摘要：

本文重点介绍了达赫拉·韦德·埃达哈布地区的特点以及在公共当局最近部署的发展政策推动下取得的成就，特别是在新冠肺炎危机之后。我们的工作首先提出了总体吸引力的概念，特别是在新冠肺炎时代旅游目的地的吸引力。其次，重点是大西洋大南部旅游区的潜力和新冠肺炎后复苏的前景。大西洋大南部旅游区是一个富饶的地区，气候宜人，自然资源丰富，撒哈拉动植物种类繁多，使其成为王国最具吸引力的地区之一，尤其是作为现代旅游和工业城市的达赫拉。尽管在以前的领土层面做出了明显的努力，但这些成就仍然不足，因此领土行为者必须采取其他行动。王国南部地区的经济发展步伐加快；因此，与经济密切相关的旅游业必须通过溢出效应从这一机会中受益，以确保该地区旅游业的发展。

关键词：地域吸引力、竞争力、旅游业、新冠肺炎。

1. Introduction

The current international context is characterized by a tough competition due to this inevitable globalization forcing the world to enter a new era known as a perpetual evolution.

Therefore, globalization is a source of pressure for the actors who evolve there: companies, civil societies, citizens, states, and territorial authorities. Spatial and temporal limits are abolished, hence the need to fight to guarantee the share of the migratory flows of people and capital throughout the world.

The inter-territorial movement of economic gain, perceptible through international capital flows, tourist flows, and foreign direct investment, highlights the challenge of greater territorial attractiveness.

Tourism, one of the largest and most dynamic sectors of activity in this globalized economy, is a sector this change has most strongly impacted. Thus, tourist destinations are increasingly trying to stand out by creating a strong brand image, while others are turning toward developing their territorial attractiveness.

The pandemic situation the world is currently experiencing leads us imperatively to a paradigm shift in post-COVID-19 attractiveness and even to a review of the barometer of the destination's attractiveness.

In Morocco, the Atlantic Great South tourist territory's potential needs to be highlighted to promote the Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab region, especially it has all the assets to develop sustainable tourism. His Majesty King Mohammed VI surrounds this region by launching the program contract and structuring projects to boost the tourist offer further.

In this perspective and as Ph.D. students, we started our research on the attractiveness of the tourist territories in Morocco. We have also established additional studies related to our main topic to deepen knowledge on tourist attractiveness. In this context, a study on the post-COVID-19 behavior of Moroccan tourists, presented at the 2nd International Colloquium on Brand, Label, and Product Intelligence organized by Orleans University (France), will be published in 2022 first trimester. The second one is in progress, concerning the post-COVID-19 profiles of tourists for a better correlation between the new needs of tourists and the foundations of tourist attractiveness.

As actors of the tourism industry, we aim to increase the capacity of our country to attract tourists by using the rich heritage that Morocco abounds in. Additionally, we are interested in tourism recovery opportunities, which will allow the resilience of the Moroccan destination in general and the Atlantic Great South tourist territory in particular. Our Moroccan destinations should show a high degree of adaptation, especially during this pandemic conjuncture, which remains the major challenge for our research.

In this sense, we are conducting this work to answer a set of questions allowing a deeper understanding of this critical subject in particular:

What are the factors of territorial attractiveness? What are the tourism potentialities to be valorized at the Atlantic Great South tourist territory? What are the prospects for the revival of the Atlantic Great South tourist area, especially in terms of attractiveness?

As an answer, we will first describe the territorial attractiveness and then proceed to the presentation of the Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab region and its potential. This contribution will be presented in four parts:

- The first axis details the notion of territorial attractiveness and its measurement factors;
- The second axis focuses on the attractiveness of tourist destinations in the COVID-19 era;
- The third axis presents the potentialities of the Atlantic Great South tourist territory;
- The fourth focuses on the prospects for revival and the actors' main actions, especially in the current pandemic context.

2. Context of and Theoretical Approach to Territorial Attractiveness

2.1. Context and Challenges of Territorial Attractiveness

The development of attractiveness and competitiveness is a multidisciplinary issue that interests various specialists, such as geographers, marketers, economists, economic, tourism, and political stakeholders.

This interest is highly relevant because competitiveness has become a sine qua non condition for standing out and ensuring sustainability in such a situation, where “territories compete and operate within a regime of competitive advantages in a globalized market” (Benko, 1999; Tien et al., 2020).

Competitiveness and attractiveness are strategic objectives for territories that make it possible to assess “the success with which regions and cities compete with each other” (Courlet, 2008). These two key variables respond to current competitive logic aimed at territorial development.

The latter, based essentially on the capture of external flows, pushes territorial actors to increase their competitiveness through hard work within the territory to ensure the quality of internal flows via a real synergy of actors.

“Advertising slogans, logos, promotional campaigns are part of the range of what is now called “city branding”” (Alexandre et al., 2010). This remains insufficient because territorial marketing cannot be reduced to simple communication strategies. A commitment of elected officials and local economic decision-makers is also needed in a long-term reflection

to create a DNA based on the identity and reality of the territory rather than promises aimed at creating an imaginary commercial brand.

2.2. The Notion of Territorial Attractiveness

Larousse defines attractiveness as “the character of what is attractive.” Territorial attractiveness refers to attracting and retaining various resources, particularly financial and human resources. A territory is considered attractive if it can attract tourists, investors, and inhabitants by offering the best conditions for settling there. This attractiveness corresponds to the influence of the territory outside its borders (Serval, 2018). It is the influence that a territory exerts on individuals' attitudes toward it (Serval, 2018).

2.3. Factors for Measuring Territorial Attractiveness

The territory is an expanse made up of several actors whose attractiveness depends on the mix of a set of ingredients: identity, actors, economic fabric, territory development policies. This will naturally give a multidimensional character to the attractiveness of territories, which remains very complex to measure. Thus, territorial actors choose and adapt their measurement factors according to the specificity of the territory and objectives targeted (Sunardi et al., 2019). Table 1 details the criteria of sustainable territorial attractiveness.

Table 1. Criteria of sustainable territorial attractiveness (Serval, 2018)

| Criteria of territorial attractiveness evaluated | Definition of the criteria | Expected impact |
|--|--|---|
| Political Attractiveness | — Sustainability of the engaged public action; — Sustainability of the governance system. | — Sustainability of the mission of general interest/continuity of local public action; — Coherence of public policies/legitimacy of public action; — Effects on local governance (such as the development of new actors, partnerships, appropriation of actions by stakeholders). |
| Economic Attractiveness | — Sustainability of the economic development model | — Direct economic and spillover effects; — Effects on innovation; — Territory marketing and external attractiveness. |
| Social Attractiveness | — Strengthening social cohesion; — Improvement of the quality of life. | Social Attractiveness: — Structuring the social bond and territorial solidarity; — Human Capital Formation. Citizen Attractiveness: — Valorization of the territorial heritage/improvement of the living environment; — Sense of belonging, territorial enhancement: Identity and federations of actors; — Local democracy, citizenship: user satisfaction. |

Territory attractiveness sustainability is ensured by the durability of the actions undertaken by the territory actors within the political, economic, and socio-civic frameworks.

To conclude this first part, it should be noted that there is a close link between territorial attractiveness and development policies, which affirms the major role

of the latter constituting the backbone of development. The following diagram explains this relationship.

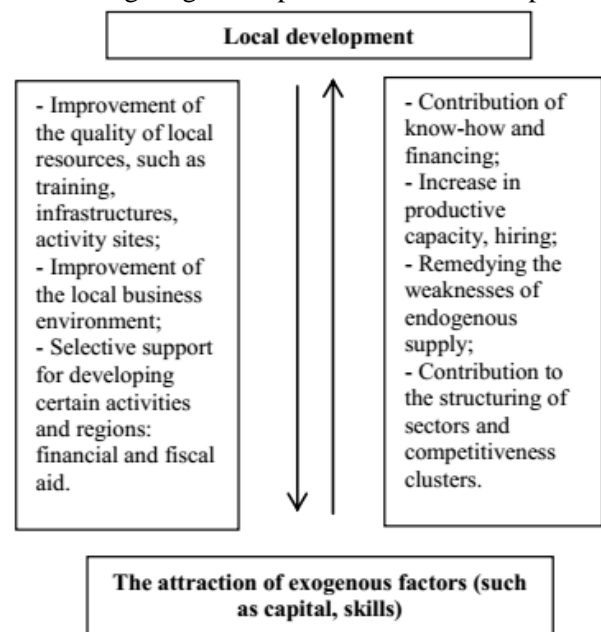


Figure 1. The two-way link between local development and attractiveness policies (Hatem, 2007)
Note: The arrow means “has implications for.”

3. The Attractiveness of Tourist Destinations in the COVID-19 Era

Tourism, a strategic sector for the world economy, is experiencing an unprecedented crisis considered by the World Tourism Organization as “the worst crisis since the Second World War.”

Coronavirus spread has forced states to adopt travel restrictions. Thus, “97 destinations (45%) have closed their borders to tourists, in whole or in part; 65 destinations (30%) have suspended international flights, in whole or in part; 39 destinations (18%) have closed their borders in a more differentiated manner by prohibiting the entry of travelers from certain countries” (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020).

Because of this new universal situation, the international tourist industry has been put on hold, especially after closing the borders. Everything has been turned upside down: airplanes grounded, reservations canceled, accommodation and catering establishments closed, shopping streets deserted, guides, event organizers, travel agents, tour operators, tourist carriers with no activity.

The repercussions have been dreadful, with a loss of \$935 billion in tourism revenues and a 72% drop in international tourist arrivals, especially in March 2020, when there was a 57% drop in arrivals. Below is the distribution of international tourist arrivals by region for 2020 (January-October 2020).



Figure 2. International tourist arrivals (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2021)

“This latest data makes clear the importance of restarting tourism as soon as it is safe to do so. The dramatic fall in international tourism places millions of livelihoods at risk, including those in developing countries. Governments in every world region have a dual responsibility: prioritizing public health while protecting jobs and businesses. They also should maintain the spirit of cooperation and solidarity that has defined our response to this shared challenge and refrain from making unilateral decisions that undermine the trust and confidence we have been working so hard to build” (Zurab Pololikashvili, the UNWTO Secretary-General).

As they emerge from the crisis, tourist destinations must implement strategies to maintain their attractiveness and differentiate themselves.

Under the current circumstances, international tourist destinations, conditioned by a set of procedures, can hardly attract travelers. The main concern is to cope with the pandemic while preserving human health. Additionally, in the time of COVID-19, the behavior of travelers has changed considerably; they begin preferring rural areas and nature because of the limitations of travel. Moreover, these spaces are safer in terms of pandemic intensity, especially since related tourist activities are usually scheduled in open air with less tourist density.

This COVID-19 experience, which has produced an increased orientation of a large part of travelers to green tourism, is a golden opportunity to rethink the sector to restart sustainable tourism based on respect for nature that would remain the origin and refuge of humanity.

Finally, it should be noted that most members of the group of tourism experts of the UNWTO expect recovery of international tourism by the second half of 2021, followed by those who expect a rebound in the first half of the next year.

4. Tourist Potential of the Atlantic Great South Territory

The region of Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahabhas has an enormous potential as a tourist destination. It relies on tourism and sea fishing as two main levers of local sustainable development. Recently, the city of Dakhla has experienced a real change as a tourist destination, mainly through several sports activities especially board sports and kite surfing, following the involvement of investors and national operators who believed in the assets of the region representing 20% of the national territory.

4.1. Geographic Location

The region of Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab is located in the extreme south of the country, on the border with Mauritania. This position, combined with its proximity to the Canary Islands, gives it the role of an open hub between Africa and Europe. The region was created by the new territorial division of regions in 2015, keeping the same provinces from the old regional division of 1997. “Its perimeter is identical to that of the former region Oued Ed-Dahab-Lagouira. It is bounded on the north by Boujdour Province, to the south and east by Mauritania, and to the west by the Atlantic Ocean. The strategic position is in the south of the country and the Micronesian space” (Haut-Commissariat au Plan du Maroc, 2018).

The region covers an area of 142,865 km² or 20% of the total area of the Kingdom. It has 143 thousand inhabitants according to the results of the General Population and Housing Census of 2014, thus representing 0.4% of the national population (Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, 2019).

4.2. Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab Region in Numbers

Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahabis the 12th region of the Kingdom. According to the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform (2019), this region is the first in poverty eradication in Morocco, the second in illiteracy eradication, and the third-largest destination for land investment in 2017. The following table provides an overview of the region's key figures:

Table 2. Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab region in numbers (The Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, 2019)

| Contribution to GDP | Public Investment | Social problems |
|---|--|----------------------------------|
| — 0.8% share in wealth creation (2017); | — 3.8% share in GB investment (2019); | — 7.3% unemployment rate (2018); |
| — 12.9% growth rate (2010-2017). | — 1% share in public establishments and enterprise investment (2019); | — 0.4% poverty rate (2014). |
| | — 11% share in the state's private land mobilized for investment (2017). | |

This region is endowed with a very rich economic and social potential, especially its productive fabric

based on the primary and tertiary sectors is of great importance.

4.3. Presentation of the Atlantic Great South Tourist Territory

To guarantee a diffusion of the benefits of tourism and the socio-economic development of all regions of Morocco, a new division of the Kingdom into eight homogeneous, distinguished, competitive, and complementary tourist territories has been established. The latter is presented as follows:



Figure 3. The eight tourist territories in Morocco (The Moroccan Society of Tourism Engineering, 2022)

This map presents the territorial division according to the forms of tourism characterizing the tourism offer in Morocco: the seaside, culture, nature, and business. This division transcends the administrative barriers to allow the regions to take advantage of all their potentialities.

The territory of the Atlantic Great South, administratively named the Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab region, consists of two provinces composed of 13 municipalities (2 urban municipalities and 11 rural municipalities):

The province of Oued Eddahabis composed of two circles and one urban commune:

- Urban Commune of Dakhla
- El Argoub Circle:
 - Rural Commune
 - Imlili rural commune
- Bir Anzarane Circle:
 - The rural commune of Bir Anzarane
 - The rural commune of Gleibat El Foula
 - The rural commune of Mijik
 - The rural commune of Oum Dreiga

4.4. The Tourist Potential and Prospects of the Atlantic Great South Territory

The Atlantic Great South territory, whose capital city is Dakhla, has a diversified natural potential consisting of the desert, oases, archaeological sites, and

a coastline forming a diversified tourist offer.

Its coastline of about 667 km on the Atlantic gives it a capacity to develop tourism and water activities further, precisely sliding sports, making tourism a key sector of the region in addition to considerable fisheries resources, allowing the development of marine fishing.

Nature tourism is also a form of tourism characterizing this territory.

“The region of Dakhla Oued Ed-Dahab concentrates 11% of the total investment committed in the private domain of the State in 2017” (Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, 2019).

Tourism takes the lion's share in terms of the land mobilized by the state to establish new projects; this shows the importance that the tourism sector has in the region. The diagram below details the land distribution, where tourism occupies 36%.

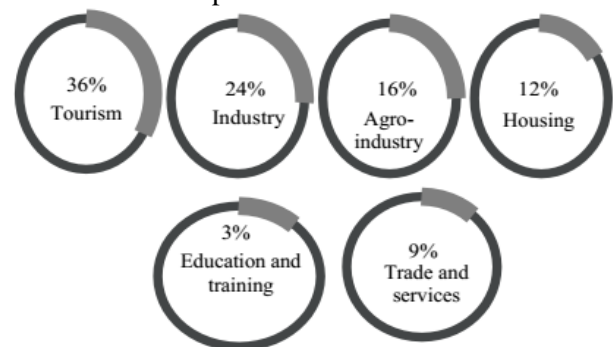


Figure 4. Structure of the mobilized state area by sector in the region of Dakhla Oued Ed-Dahab in 2017 (The Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, 2019; Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2019)

Morocco is working to activate the levers of tourism competitiveness of the Great Atlantic South territory by providing the tourism industry with large property lands that will be used to host tourism projects.

The launch of this new generation of projects not only strengthens the capacity of the destination but also enriches its offer by pulling up the destination to enable it to reposition itself with target markets.

Due to its geographical position on an exceptional bay, the year-round sunshine, its landscapes combining the sea and desert, its extensive beaches, and the richness of its hinterland, the region of Dakhla Oued Eddahab has entered a new phase with promising prospects through the signing of a set of program contracts, including mainly the Program of Integrated Development of Rural Tourism and Nature to boost local and domestic tourism in the pearl of the South. Additionally, His Majesty King Mohamed VI pays special attention to this territory to make it one of the tourist clusters of the Kingdom.

It should be recalled in this regard that a partnership agreement was concluded on September 29, 2014, with various ministerial departments concerned with territorial development to ensure this public seed fund of 2.4 MM MAD at the national level, whose 362 M MAD are allocated to the three regions of the South.

Moreover, the territory of the Atlantic Great South, especially the city of Dakhla, remains one of the most

popular destinations for Moroccan and foreign tourists; this is also affirmed by a survey launched by Tourisma Post (2017), an information portal on tourism in Morocco, from July 15 to August 31, 2015, to elect the preferred region of Internet users 2015.

Tourisma Post has collected no less than 97594 votes. The region "The Grand Atlantic South" won most votes, 36.83%, followed by Cap Nord (23.99%) and Atlas & Valley (21.09%) (La Nouvelle Tribune, 2015). Thus, the Atlantic Great South was elected as the "Preferred Region of Internet users in 2015."

"To become a link between Africa and Europe, the region should innovate in the design of its local development project to exploit its potential and natural assets and establish an infrastructure commensurate with its intrinsic characteristics, while considering the dimension "sustainability of resources." The seaside tourism, cultural and adventure, water sports, the development of agro-industrial activities and the opportunity for developing clean energy are all niches that can form a basis for the economic attractiveness of the region and improve its business climate" (The Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, 2019).

5. The Post-COVID-19 Recovery of the Atlantic Great South Territory

Like other destinations in the world, Morocco has been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and has put forward an action plan to restart tourism to support all the actors of tourism ecosystem. The urgency of the moment is to preserve the jobs of a range of professionals while adopting the necessary measures to forge a more resilient tourism economy.

According to the High Commission for Planning, the Moroccan tourism industry contributed 7.1% to the national GDP in 2019, 81.4 billion dirhams. The output of the tourism sector stood at 122.6 billion dirhams in 2019, when the value rose from 61.6 billion dirhams in 2018 to 65.8 billion dirhams in 2019, thus, recording growth of 6.8% compared to the previous year.

Moreover, to keep this significant contribution to the national economy, the Ministry of Tourism, Handicrafts, Transport and Social Economy, in close cooperation with tourism professionals, has developed a recovery plan. Before detailing the latter, it is advisable to highlight the impact of the crisis on the sector.

"The National Tourism Confederation has estimated the impact of the COVID-19 crisis at MAD 34.1 billion in terms of lost tourism revenues in 2020 and MAD 14 billion in terms of lost hotel revenues, for an overall drop of about 6 million tourists (-98%), which will cause a total loss of 11.6 million overnight stays. No less than 500,000 jobs and 8,500 companies are at risk, including classified tourist accommodation companies, tourist catering companies, travel agencies, tourist transport companies and car rental companies. The air transport industry has recorded estimated losses of 4.9

million fewer passengers and a loss of revenue of USD 728 million" (European Union Delegation to Morocco – Commercial Section, 2020).

A heavy toll has pushed the actors of the sector (stakeholders, the private sector, and professionals) to mobilize hastily to face this critical situation to rebuild Moroccan tourism, especially to adapt it to the new market realities and tourist behavior.

These actions have been crowned by signing a contract program between the state (The Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform, The Ministry of Tourism, Handicrafts, Air Transport and Social Economy, and The Ministry of Labour and Professional Insertion) and the private sector (The National Confederation of Tourism and the Professional Grouping of Banks of Morocco) concluded in accordance with the royal guidelines outlined in the Throne Speech of July 29, 2020. This contract for 2020–2022 focuses on three crucial points: preserving the economic fabric and employment, accelerating the recovery phase, and laying the foundations for a sustainable transformation of the sector.

"The contract program includes 21 measures that will allow the sector to preserve the economic fabric, maintaining jobs and income of employees, ensuring access to social coverage for all actors in the sector; economically and financially support the sector for recovery, stimulating investment and transformation of the production tool, strengthening resilience and facilitating the resumption of activity, laying the foundations for a sustainable transformation of tourism in Morocco" (The Ministry of Tourism, Handicraft, Air Transport and Social Economy, 2022).

Two committees have been set up, a steering committee aimed at steering the implementation of the provisions of the contract program and a monitoring committee whose objective is to ensure the operational monitoring of the contract.

As for marketing and competitiveness, the Moroccan National Tourism Office (MNTO) has begun a tour to the regions of the Kingdom to set up regional recovery plans in terms of promotion to regional officials, regional councils of tourism and tourism professionals.

Additionally, the Moroccan National Tourism Office (MNTO) has set up a new marketing strategy with a multi-brand segmentation aiming at three targets: national travelers and Moroccans residing abroad, international travelers, and professional, institutional, and media partners.

Thus, creative concepts have emerged to accompany this segmentation, such as the brand "Ntla9awfbladna" meaning "Let's meet in our homeland," launched in May 2021 targeting nationals and Moroccans of the world; "the corporate brand" dedicated to interactions with the professional and institutional ecosystem of the office in a B2B approach.

To ensure the continuity of the activity, the actors of tourism bet on digital transformation. Moreover, the Tourism Marketing Days (TMD) initiated in 2019 are

renewed in virtual format to become regular meetings of the sector: TMD Pro, TMD Media, TMD Regions, TMD Sky Restart.

In the same way, the Atlantic Great South territory will benefit from the above-mentioned measures, taken by the state institutions aiming at the support and revival of the sector. In this sense, the regional declination of national strategies is the starting point to restart tourism in the region of Dakhla Oued Eddahab.

Moreover, to further consolidate the work of the committee of economic intelligence, a regional cell within the regional direction of the High Commission for Planning (HCP) Dakhla has been established to estimate the effect of COVID-19 on regional tourism and propose scenarios for the recovery of regional order. The latter conducts, in collaboration with all executives of the regional direction of the planning, a study on the effect of the pandemic on the tourism sector.

In this sense, the HCP has proposed a set of recommendations for the takeoff of tourism activity involving governance, social, funding, marketing, competitiveness and communication, considering the particularities of the region Dakhla Oued Eddahab.

6. Conclusion

A true heaven of peace between the lagoon and the ocean, the Atlantic Great South territory is known for its beautiful landscapes of the southern Moroccan coastline, the mildness of the climate, the paradisiacal natural sites and the marriage of the sea and the desert.

This contribution, having as objective to participate in the enrichment of the theoretical and practical foundation of territorial marketing in Morocco, was an opportunity to identify the main potentialities of the Atlantic Great South tourist territory. It has allowed detailing the particularities of the region with an exposure of the key variables of the tourist activity based on the attributions of the different national and regional institutional organizations.

Our article has highlighted the national strategy initiated in the Kingdom to support and promote the tourism sector in Morocco in general and the Atlantic Great South tourism territory in particular while presenting the opportunities of post COVID-19 recovery.

This analysis allowed us to identify the needs of the region to bring proposals to improve the attractiveness of the region and to propose solutions adapted to the recovery of tourism in a post COVID-19 phase.

Additionally, the implementation of a territorial strategy supported by a set of technical assistance mechanisms for the recovery and development of tourism in southern Morocco is of great importance.

To considerably improve the attractiveness of the region, greater emphasis must be focused on territorial promotion. Communication actions are to be put in place to successfully develop the image of the destination to create competitive advantage.

Collective and deep reflection on the territory's

DNA, the definition of a differentiation strategy, implementing the concept of territory's ambassadors, encouraging proximity between inhabitants and local institutions via a feeling of positive belonging are actions to be deployed at in the Atlantic Great South tourist territory to broaden its growth perspectives and strengthen its appeal and competitiveness.

In this sense, the Great Atlantic South can draw inspiration from similar successful models on an international scale while ensuring the synergy of the efforts of the actors and the involvement of the citizens, which remain essential.

Study extension on this subject will also be the aim of our future research within the framework of our thesis work, consisting in identifying the tracks of development for better tourist attractiveness of the above-mentioned territory.

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