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Souss Massa the Moroccan kingdom's New Economic Hub

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ABSTRACT

Souss Massa, one of the most prosperous regions of the kingdom, its geographical centrality, its economic and natural assets, as well as its significant social potential will enable it to become a future economic pole linking the northern and southern parts of Morocco, despite the challenges it faces. The current contribution is an attempt at a literature review, intending to highlight the various potentials of the Sous Massa region as well as his Majesty King Mohammed VI's new projects and vision for such a historical region.

Keywords: *Souss Massa, Assets, potential, challenges, geographical centrality, economic pole, new projects*

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of a decentralized democratic state, Morocco has resorted to advanced regionalization in order to support all regions in the sectors of health education and road infrastructure. In addition, it has ensured a posteriori control over the regional council and its agency to allow the consolidation of regional democracy, good governance and development of the region.

This huge project of advanced regionalization has divided the Kingdom into 12 regions instead of 16, a reduction of 25%. This new administrative division was made according to specific criteria based on the principles of efficiency, homogeneity, balance and proportionality, but also accessibility and proximity.

The new dynamics of advanced regionalization were traced by King Mohammed VI to breathe, particularly in the region of Souss Massa.

Souss Massa is a region covering an area of 53,789 Km² or 7.6% of the national territory. It has 2,676,847 inhabitants (RGPH 2014), a density of 49.8 inhabitants per km² and 7.9% of the total population of the kingdom, including 4,914 foreign nationalities. It is located in the middle of Morocco, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders with Algeria in the East. It is bordered to the north by the region of Marrakech-Safi, to the south by the region of Guelmim-

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Oued Noun, and the east by the region of Drâa-Tafilelt and Algeria, to the west by the Atlantic Ocean.

The region has two prefectures (Agadir-Ida -Ou-Tanane and Inezgane- Ait Melloul) and four provinces (Chtouka- Ait Baha, Taroudant, Tata and Tiznit). The total number of communes in Sous Massa is 175, of which 21 are urban and 154 rural, i.e. almost 12 per cent of all communes at the national level.

Moreover, the agriculture, tourism, fishing and mining sectors have made Souss-Massa one of the most dynamic regions in Morocco. Today, these so-called traditional sectors face many challenges. This is what has made the Souss-Massa region sluggish and tame compared to other regions despite its assets.

On the occasion of the Green March, the King called for the Souss-Massa region to become an economic pole linking the north and south of Morocco. He visited the region to inaugurate numerous projects.

This research tends to answer the following question: "**How does a region as rich as Souss Massa, a region with such natural and economic potential, fail to reach the kingdom's locomotive regions?**". Through this issue and through a literature review, we will try to shed light on the Souss Massa region, its potential, its assets and its challenges on the one hand. On the other hand, we will explain the region as a fertile market for foreign investors.

II. ECONOMIC POTENTIALITY OF THE REGION

The Souss Massa region has a crucial economic potential based on its natural resources and its main sectors of activity, including Tourism, Fishing, Agri-food industry and Mining. This is what makes the region one of the key drivers of the kingdom's economic development.

Despite the dry climate of the region and the scarcity of water, Souss Massa has a useful agricultural area of 616,500 hectares, of which 30% are irrigated, with the main production of citrus fruits and a produce market exceeds annually 50% of the production of the national total with a regional GDP of 17.3% and national GDP of 9%.

In addition to that, and after the impulse of the Green Morocco Plan, the agricultural sector in the region has experienced a strong development and has benefited from several structural projects, namely the National Irrigation Water Saving Program, the development and labelling of local products, the project to safeguard the El Guerdane perimeter, etc...

Then comes the fishing sector, which represents an opportunity for the Souss Massa region, it being one of the key sectors that present national wealth.

The region is the first for landing seafood products in value and the third in volume. It has a large deep-sea and coastal fishing port in Agadir (54,046 tons) and nine landing points (serviced landing sites) with a value of 457,138 KMAD in Agadir and 21.5 between the SLS of Imssouane, Imiouadar, Aglou, Tifnit and Taghazout.

With that, the fisheries sector is one of the main providers of employment in the region, employing 170 000 direct and 490 000 indirect jobs and reflecting a regional GDP of 6% and a national GDP of 42%.

Seeing the importance of the sector in the region, Haliopolis, which is a business park, will be set up as the first in Morocco and is devoted to add value to sea products. It covers an area of 150 Hectares.

Souss Massa is also a touristic destination by excellence, its mild climate, the variety and beauty of its natural landscapes, its rich heritage, its diversified relief, and its extensive beaches lined with fine golden sand make the region a favourite international destination for international and local tourists.

In terms of infrastructure, the tourism sector has the means to attract all categories of tourists, as in commercial infrastructure (hotels, tourist arrival services, restaurants, cafes, and various entertainment venues ...) or public infrastructure (security, transport and communication facilities, trade and services ...).

According to official figures, the region has 2,323 classified hotels (1 to 5 stars) with a bedding capacity of 39,000 beds, which represents 30% of the national accommodation capacity. It registers 33.3% of the national overnight stays, with 4.7 million overnight stays per year. This tourism sector provides 120.000 jobs and generates an added value of 5.4 billion dirhams.

Furthermore, Souss Massa has an Arganeraei Biosphere Reserve (A.B.R.), which covers a vast Intermontane Plateau of more than 800,000 hectares, which represents 14.25% of Morocco's forest area and which was declared by UNESCO in December 1998, the first Biosphere Reserve in Morocco, within the framework of the Man and the Biosphere (M.A.B.) program.

Apart from the products related to the Argan tree, The Souss Massa region offers a variety of extraordinary other local products like: honey, dates (Tata), almonds (Tafraout), and saffron (Taliouine and Tazenakht). Aside from these local products, the region is also known and renowned for its handicrafts in jewellery and more specifically, silver (Tiznit), in weaving (Tafraout) and basketry also...

Lastly, one of the most dynamic sectors in the region is mining. The region is rich in mining resources because it conceals under its different soil minerals, mainly Tinghir with the first silver reserve in North Africa, followed by that Iskaoun in Taliouine, then Imaoune in Igherm. There exist some other mines that hold great importance also like: gold, bronze, silver, manganese, barite and iron.

III. SOUSS-MASSA, A REGION WITH STRONG POTENTIAL BUT LACKS IN VITALITY...

In terms of GDP, and according to the HCP, the Souss Massa region is ranked 7th out of 12 national regions with a GDP of 25,161 DH per inhabitant, which is considered below the national average of 30,510 DH. In addition, Souss Massa presents 43.5 billion DH in terms of household consumption expenditure with 15,658 DH per capita, while the national average is 17,499 DH.

In conclusion, despite the potential of the region, its agricultural fertility, its abundance of fish and its great tourist assets, Souss Massa is still lagging behind other regions of the kingdom, namely Casablanca-Settat, Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima, Marrakech-Safi and Fez-Meknes

(A) A region facing many challenges:

Souss Massa is unable to take off despite its potential because of numerous economic and social challenges that have hampered the region's implementation capacities.

On the economic level, the region has become sluggish due to various causes, including the close dependence on the economic triptych (Agriculture, tourism and fishing). In fact, the triptych represents 45% of the GDP of the region, yet it reveals many disparities, mainly the water deficit that reaches 350 Mn/m³ with delays in the implementation of projects aimed at increasing access to water, according to a study by the McKinsey firm, the limited port capacity as well as the southward migration of the fishery resources, adding to that the rundown state of the hotel park and the lack of entertainment in the tourism sector. Adding to that, the public investment in the region is limited and well below the national average, with a drop of - 44% between 2010 and 2012 in private investment continuing in the two following years.

Also, the delayed opening up of the region by rail and air, is dragging the development of Souss Massa and its economic growth...

Socially, the region also has a high rate of unemployment, mainly among young people, due to the rural exodus. Adding to that the alarming state of the health sector, given that the supply of health care is said to be insufficient, with six beds per 10,000 inhabitants compared to an

average of 8 beds per 10,000 inhabitants nationwide.

Along with that, the region has an illiteracy rate higher than the national average with 33% against 31% for the country as a whole, the level of education which is lower than the national average is reflected not only in basic skills but also in the higher education with only 5% of the population that has entered a university against 6% at the national level and 73% of the region's population have the primary level or even less.

(B) The Royal speech on the occasion of the 44th anniversary of the Green March to tip the scales

King Mohammed VI made it known in his speech on November 6, 2019, the importance of developing some regions within the framework of advanced regionalization. The objective of the new dynamic plan traced by the Sovereign is to improve the region of Souss Massa given its geographical importance, the region represents a geographical median between the north and the south of the Kingdom, as announced by the King "*Agadir is almost equidistant from Tangier and the Saharan Provinces*". This will enable the region to be transformed into a central economic hub of the kingdom by providing forward-looking strategic directions ranging from infrastructure development to the launch of numerous structural projects for the Souss Massa region.

After the royal speech through which the Sovereign had called for the Souss Massa region to be given its rightful place in the country's economic dynamic, King Mohammed VI went to Agadir to inaugurate and launch a series of projects.

(C) The projects launched by His Majesty in Souss Massa

1. Rail and air infrastructure

As pronounced by the Sovereign, "*We call for serious reflection on the establishment of a rail link between Marrakech and Agadir, with the prospect of a later extension to the rest of the Provinces of the South. We also recommend the development of the road network which we are already reinforcing by the setting up of the Agadir-Dakhla expressway*". The geographical centrality of Souss Massa, as well as its economic and natural assets, will be enhanced by the establishment of a Marrakech-Agadir railway line as well as the development of the road network, which will enable the region to rise to become a solid economic pole and catch up with the other more evolved regions of the kingdom, and as HM the King said: « *This line will contribute not only to opening up the region as a whole, but above all to its development and economic growth, in particular by boosting the transport of people and goods and providing support for economic sectors in general, export activities and tourism in particular.* »

2. Souss-Massa Innovation City

His Majesty inaugurated on February 6, 2020, Souss Massa Innovation City, which is the first step of the Industrial Acceleration Plan, it was launched in 2018 and is seen as the first project to provide the region with an infrastructure to host technology, focusing on entrepreneurship and the creation of innovative start-ups through the incubation process, and also to expand the technological transfer and improve the interaction between companies.

The Innovation City is evidence of His Majesty's willingness to lead the region of Souss Massa as a central economic hub of the kingdom, located within the University of Ibn Zohr, whose implementation required a budget of 42 million dirhams.

The Industrial Acceleration Plan aims to create a Technopark for SMEs and start-ups in the technology, information and communication sectors. In addition to that, The Innovation City also has an incubator for innovative companies and start-ups, a Research and Development Centre housing laboratories for "Identification and Analysis of Natural Entities", "Biotechnology and Health", "Residue Analysis", "Climate Change and Sustainable Development", "Water, Energy and Renewable Energies" and "Industry Lab".

We can say that the function of The Innovation City will thus further boost the good dynamics of companies in the city of Agadir.

In conclusion, the objective of The Innovation City is to promote entrepreneurship through an incubation process and to put researchers and companies in contact to work together on innovative projects to add value to the Souss Massa region.

3. The inauguration of an equipped landing point at Imourane

King Mohammed VI inaugurated on February 7, 2020, a newly developed landing point (PDA) in Imourane. The realization of the project required an overall cost of 24.6 million DH. This large-scale project will improve the living and working conditions of fishermen, will allow them to be more organized in the future, and also narrow down the space for selling fish to fish merchants so that there will be better transparency of prices.

In addition, the inauguration of the landing point will make it possible to develop and restructure the small-scale fisheries sector through the creation of a center combining the economic and social environment and the preservation of fishery resources.

According to statistics, 130 sea-fishermen will benefit from this project, operating on 52 artisanal boats with a projected annual production of 2,500 tons and a projected annual turnover of around 75 million DH. In addition, HM King Mohammed VI handed over 52 outboard

engines for the benefit of the cooperative "Aftas Tamraght" of Imourane.

Now, Souss-Massa will be the second pole of aquaculture in the Kingdom, after Dakhla.

4. Agadir's Psychiatric Hospital

The health sector was one of the main concerns of King Mohammed VI, after the launch of the University Hospital Center of Agadir in June 2018. It is built on a plot of 30 hectares including 127 thousand square meters covered, it also required an investment of nearly 2.33 billion DH, including 1.2 billion DH for works, 110 million DH for technical studies and 1 billion DH for equipment. In the same strategy of developing hospital infrastructure, strengthening primary health services and bringing them closer to citizens, the Sovereign launched the Agadir Psychiatric Hospital with a budget of 55 million dirhams in order to strengthen psychiatric domain, medical and paramedical training and improve the care of patients with mental disorders.

The hospital will be covering a total area of 25,097 m². It will include a day hospital, mental home, children's psychiatry, geriatric, forensic medicine unit, an addictology unit, an outpatient unit, and a hospitalization unit (men-women-children) and emergency service.

5. The largest desalination plant in the world

On February 13, 2020, HM King Mohammed VI has launched the world's largest seawater desalination plant and one of the largest projects in Morocco and in The Souss Massa region. In order to have seawater as an alternative to cope with water scarcity.

A project with a budget of 4.41 billion DH, the latter being the result of a public-private partnership. Of which 2.42 billion were contributed by the private sector, 1.86 MMDH by the public sector as well as a contribution of 120 MDH by farmers through subscriptions.

The project is established on a total area of 13,600 hectares, the desalination plant and sea water intake will be spread over an area of 20 hectares north of Douira. And it will use the latest technological processes: reverse osmosis, connection to clean electricity, pressure exchanger system, ...

The plant will have an initial capacity of 275 000m³/day, i.e. 125 000m³/day of agricultural water and 150 000m³/day of drinking water.

The plant will have a maximum capacity of 400,000 m³/day equally distributed between agricultural and drinking water. The following infrastructures is crucial for the plant to achieve its objectives, an irrigation water reservoir of 42 480m³, a drinking water reservoir of 35 000m³, five water pumping stations, an 18.4km main water supply and a 290km irrigation network.

This big project will be sustainably powered by wind energy in order to respect the environmental approach.

6. Agadir's Urban Development Program (2020-2024)

Six billion dirhams is the investment granted to the urban development program of Agadir (2020-2024), this ambitious program includes six axes which aim at reinforcing the basic infrastructures in order to guarantee a better mobility, to consolidate the road network and to improve the attractiveness of the city of Agadir as a national and international tourist destination, this city which is the economic pole of the region of Souss Massa.

- The first axis: First bus line with a high level of service:

The central position that the Souss Massa region is destined to occupy within the kingdom and within the framework of the urban development of the city of Agadir (2020-2024), the integration of a modern and efficient means of transport such as the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) which has proved its worth all over the world has become indispensable, as it is considered as a real solution to decongestion with a flexibility of use and high hourly frequency.

The project will be carried out over 15.5 km, linking the port of Agadir to the Tikiouine district and neighboring industrial zones, and serving the city's administrative district, Hassan II Avenue, Souk El Had, Hassan I Avenue, the Ibn Zohr university complex and the Tassila industrial zone.

- The second axis: The completion of the first section of the North-East bypass route:

The completion of almost 25 km of the first section of the northeast bypass, thus linking the airport of Agadir Al-Massira to the city's commercial port. In addition, this project allows the widening and rehabilitation of the expressway, the development of engineering structures and new entrances to the city from this future road. This project is one of many that have been launched to reinforce the infrastructures of the city of Agadir and its decongestion.

- The third axis: The urban development of the tourist zone of Agadir:

The urban development of the touristic area as well as the reinforcement of its attractiveness requires the realization of several projects, mainly:

- The city's cross-city link with the coastal area.
- Rehabilitation of the cornice.
- Realization of public facilities (Timitar museum, tourist information office).
- Redevelopment of green spaces in the touristic area.

- Rehabilitation of Valley of the Birds park.
- Reinforcement of the road and lighting network.
- Renovation of urban furniture and the creation of thematic tourist circuits (commercial, recreational, cultural and sports).
- The fourth axis: The preservation of the environment and the development of green spaces in the city of Agadir:

The preservation of the environment and the development of green spaces is a project that is part of the Agadir urban development program (2020-2024) of the city of Agadir, in particular, the creation of Al Inbiâat park (25 hectares), Tikiouine park (28 hectares), the restructuring and upgrading of Olhaou garden and Ibn Zaidoun park, the rehabilitation of several gardens and public squares, and also the modernization of street furniture.

- The fifth axis: the protection and enhancement of cultural and touristic heritage:

According to Ahmed Hajji, Mayor of the Souss-Massa region, the fifth axis aims at the promotion of religion, the protection and enhancement of the city's heritage, and cultural promotion.

- The sixth axis: Focusing on various sectors (sports, health, education, economic activities and local commerce):

The final priority of the Agadir urban development program is to improve the quality of life of the city's citizens, in particular by improving basic social amenities and completing the upgrading of under-equipped districts and supporting the city's demographic and urban development.

7. The Souss-Massa region finally takes off

After the projects launched by His Majesty, the Souss Massa region foresees a better future as well as a fertile ground for investment for both local and foreign investors.

According to the latest Doing Business 2017 report of the World Bank, the Souss Massa region is the first region in the Kingdom in terms of "Improving the Business Climate in Morocco".

Furthermore, Souss Massa is at the forefront regarding the procedure, time and cost of constructing a building or resolve a commercial dispute before the courts. In addition, the region has an infrastructure that guarantees its unfailing interconnection links, thus enabling it to accompany economic growth and competitiveness. It also has an international airport which is the 3rd airport of the Kingdom in terms of passenger traffic with 1 845 199 passengers registered

at the end of November 2019, as well as the large Agadir Adrar stadium, which welcomes 45 480 spectators, this stadium is an architectural marvel with a roof inspired by Berber tents giving it the authentic Moroccan style. The sports infrastructure that the region possesses has seduced the prestigious English club "Manchester City" to prepare the concentration course for the Man City women's team. In addition, future cooperation and partnership between the two Hassania clubs of Agadir and Manchester City is envisaged.

Indeed, the region also has an efficient and qualified human capital. Today the Ibn Zohr University offers a dozen public higher education institutions and poly disciplinary faculties as well as about thirty private schools and institutes specialized in various fields, creating young graduates mastering languages and new technologies, culturally open, with a capacity to adapt to changes in activities and with competitive wage costs.

8. Souss-Massa, a fertile investment field

Souss Massa is now an investment opportunity, particularly for British investors who are forced to invest in emerging markets due to Brexit. As indicated by Mr Reilly, the UK Ambassador to Morocco that "Morocco represents a great opportunity for the British market, which has not yet been really seized by our companies". The Souss region represents a real opportunity for the United Kingdom, especially after the important projects launched by King Mohammed VI and the region's economic and natural assets. It is in this perspective that the United Kingdom can accompany the Souss Massa region in its harmonious and sustainable development, as a result, all parties stand to benefit.

The British are interested in several sectors, including energy and more particularly in the fields of renewable energies, hydrogen, natural gas and research and innovation. This interest resulted in a meeting by videoconference, in the presence of the UK ambassador to Morocco, Thomas Reilly, Rabbah, the former Minister of Energy, and Grimstone, the British Minister of Investment, to discuss investment opportunities in the Kingdom and the prospects for bilateral cooperation, which could find fertile ground in the Souss Massa region since it represents nearly 30% of the national mining heritage and is one of the dynamic sectors of the region. In addition to the other sectors of activity likely to interest British investors, the key sectors of the region but also other development sectors that the Regional Development Plan (RDP) has already identified.

Not to mention that during the royal speech, HM King Mohammed VI mentioned the "central" aspect of the Souss Massa region, between the economically more developed north of Morocco and the southern provinces, but also the rest of the continent. It is also in the spirit of the gateway

to the African market that encourages the British to act quickly on their part to position themselves in the market.

IV. CONCLUSION

After two and a half years of the official launch of the urban development programme, the programme has been marked by the completion of work on several projects for an overall investment of 69 million dollar, i.e. 11% of the overall cost of the programme. Thus, 56 projects are underway and total a global cost of more than 53.5 billions of dollars.

Indeed, the new dynamics of the advanced regionalisation in parallel with the projects launched by King Mohammed VI, will allow the Souss Massa region to join its fundamental place with the locomotive regions of Morocco.

This will allow foreign companies, including English companies, to invest in a fertile emerging market in order to seize the opportunities offered by the region.

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