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# Information and communication technology and the exploration of regional economic information: An analysis of the economic strategy of the regional investment center of Agadir, Souss-Massa Region, Morocco

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Communication has long been considered in light of social facts, territory and economic development. The techniques and practices it involves gradually cover the regional scope. The examination of this convergence is necessary not only in terms of the empirical approach that framework the appearance and development of information and communication technology, but also in terms of the practices engendered. From this perspective, the ultimate goal of the region, established in Morocco in 1997, is to stimulate its economy in order to create investment opportunities. The regional investment center (RIC), an organization undertaking development at the regional level, has a leading role in networking economic information, thus exerting a direct impact on the mobility of businesses locally.

**Key words:** Information, communication, region, investment, enterprise.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, globalization and the development of information and communications technologies (ICT) led to the emergence of new models of development, through a complex phenomenon of sedimentation. Morocco has undergone major political, economic and territorial reforms. These reforms are the result of a guideline planning that is part of a long process of discussion between public authorities and private actors.

The years of structural adjustment policy (1983 to 1992) resulted in stabilizing macroeconomic indicators, namely the reduction of public spending. Development strategies for this phase "conceived development in a technical way" (Laghrissi, 2010). The only thing taken into consideration was the need to minimize the state's interventionism and its unilateral control mode. Development policies based on the central role of the

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nation-state and on economic centralization became obsolete.

The adoption of a series of international agreements starting from the second half of the 1990s marked the resolute enrollment of Morocco in a process of economic openness: Joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995; signing the Association Agreement with the European Union in 1996 and the Free Trade Agreement with the United States of America in 2004. This process goes along with the country joining the information society. The exploration and dissemination of economic information have become an essential issue of development at both national and regional levels.

The research objective of this paper stems from the observation that the integration of ICT and economic activities gives this technology-intensive sector a leading role in spatial integration of the regional economy in Morocco. In this respect, it appears important to consider the methods of intervention of the region as a territorial entity uses with the local business fabric (The entity of region was born in 1997 mainly out of economic considerations as stated in Dahir No. 1 to 97 to 84 of 2 April 1997) (Official Bulletin No. 4470, 1997). In other words, how can ICT networks contribute to the creation of a climate for investment that enables businesses to adapt to competitive markets?

The pre-eminence of information generated from a centralized logic contrasts with the spirit of decentralization advocated by Law No. 47-96 establishing regions in Morocco. This law considers the region as a local community, and has a diagnostic capacity for its territory and the businesses located there. Assuming that locally collected networking information allows enterprises to make better micro-economic decisions, it is necessary to reflect on the role of economic agencies with a regional focus in the development of information methods; especially those agencies that provide companies with competitive advantage when looking for the best implantation sites.

The research objective of this study takes as a case study the communication strategy of the Regional Investment Center of Souss-Massa Region (RIC-SM) in Morocco.

### **Communication and economic information in Morocco: A contrasting evolution**

The actions of regional economic bodies are the backbone of the provincial economic development. Morocco has been engaged in a widespread movement of decentralization since the 1970s. History teaches us that there are no stable boundaries between the responsibilities of the central government and those devolved to the regions during this early time.

These shifting boundaries comprised of the seven economic regions, established on June 16, 1971 (Official

Bulletin No. 3060, 1971), are no more than territorial constituencies grouping different provinces (According to Article 1 of Dahir No. 1-71-77 of 16 June 1971 establishing economic regions, a region is defined as a set of provinces that geographically, economically and socially maintain or are likely to maintain relations to stimulate their development and thereby justify comprehensive planning).

For the sake of simplification, the first decentralization laws assigned the control and management of economic information to the central government: "in this scenario, the territory represents a community in a geographical area, sometimes despite deep economic mutations" (Hinti, 2005). Following this centralized logic of exploration, Hinti (2005) writes that "the majority of information takes place from the center, and is adapted based on the data of national accounts, as a technique for quantitative assessment of the economic activity" (ibid.).

### **Logic and state of the analysis and dissemination of economic information in Morocco**

The first attempts in this context date back to the 1950s with the enactment in 1959 of the Dahir No. 1-29 to 228 on statistical surveys of public services (Official Bulletin No. 2449, 1959). This text set up the Coordinating Committee of Statistical Surveys under the Ministry of Interior and Economy.

In 1973, the investment code was introduced (Official Bulletin No. 3172, 1973). This text is based on studies conducted by the Coordinating Committee of Statistical Surveys on seven economic regions set up in 1971. The goal was to establish segmentation for tax exemption depending on the intensity of economic activity (These are the provinces of Tarfaya, Ouarzazate, KsarEs-Souk, Oujda, Nador, Taza, ElJadida, Settat, Beni-Mellal and Safi). This tax competition has negative effects subsequently, leading to the geographic concentration of tax base.

In 1968, the Committee for Coordination and Statistical Studies (COCOES) was established under Law No. 370 to 67 on statistical studies (Official Bulletin No. 2911, 1968). The implementation in Morocco of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) between 1983 and 1992 imposed budget constraints during this phase, which had a negative impact on conducting statistical investigations, especially economic ones.

In 1998, a division for economic forecasting and planning was established and attached to the Prime Minister (Official Bulletin No. 4574, 1998). It became a ministry in 2002 (Official Bulletin No. 4832, 2000a). Article 2 of the Decree No. 2-02-397, 2002 assigns to it the collection, analysis and dissemination of economic and statistical information at the national level (Official Bulletin No. 5030, 2002b).

Since 2003, the Ministry of Economic Forecasting and

Planning became an administration under the name of the High Commission for Planning (HCP). The HCP puts online all data from surveys and studies on economic forecasting for short and medium terms through a set of thematic portals whose scope also includes economic development.

In February 2009, the Moroccan Agency for Investment and Development (MAID) was established (Official Bulletin No. 5714, 2009). It was annexed to the Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies and took over the tasks of the Foreign Investment Division created in 1996. Article 3 of Law No. 41 to 08 establishing the agency states that the MAID leads "promotion and communication campaigns to highlight investment opportunities in Morocco; it updates the database related to investment" (Official Bulletin No. 5714, 2009). MAID also presents on its website the whole set of national economic data.

Like the High Commission for Planning, the Moroccan Agency for Investment and Development was subject to the supervision of the state. The fact that it had to follow the practices and procedures of the central administration hindered the promotion of the regional economy. The tasks that the agency has carried out also show how the information gap is detrimental for Morocco in terms of investment attractiveness.

The image of Morocco is tainted by illegal immigration, the conflict of Western Sahara, and the involvement of Moroccans in terrorism. This unacceptable stereotype reveals the serious informational deficit. It is not enough to have expertise, it is necessary to make it widespread.

Hence, there is the challenge of HCP and MAID to market a positive image of the country. Meeting this challenge requires the definition of a proactive and powerful informational strategy, restoring visibility and confidence among economic agents and involving regions in a joint vision. This statement is based on the conviction that the production, processing and spreading of information about the economy of each region should not be out of the local authorities' hands.

### **What breakthroughs are needed to overcome the logic of central control?**

Despite all its improvements, the statistical information system in Morocco remains fundamentally marked by centralization logic. The data on the regional economy, during the collection, processing or distribution, are derived from the global data conceived in decision-making centers concerned with economic, political and administrative matters. As a result, the configuration of businesses in various sectors follows the same logic of centralization. Therefore, the region as a decentralized entity is obliged to go through the information circuits designed at the center to publicize its investment potential. The question that then arises is it to know

which information and communication mechanisms must be set up to make the region, as an administrative entity, play its role of economic leader. There is no systemic response to this question. It is certain, however, that the players in the region, including economic operators and authorities, have the responsibility to lead these mechanisms. Information and communication is another area to institutionalize economic governance among local authorities.

### **Networking information technology: Towards the creation of regional digital economic clusters**

The introduction of ICT frameworks the economic territory, and leads to a greater dependence of the enterprise on its immediate environment. The region can promote the use of ICTs by intervening directly or indirectly with the local entrepreneurial fabric.

The action is direct when the region itself uses informational tools that have a positive impact on the economic life of its territory. This is to simplify administrative and fiscal procedures that entrepreneurs are required to follow. In this respect, we mention setting up digital information networks, economic observatories or watch units that collect and spread economic information. Achieving these goals requires, above all, integrating the territory in information networks.

Like infrastructure networks, a central information network contrasts with the logic of decentralization, which advocates a polycentric development of information databases. From this perspective, the territory is not the juxtaposition of single components, but a coherent system; the flow of economic information is a major relationship between the components of this system.

The region can also indirectly influence the use of ICTs in the economic field by multiplying synergic actions between local companies and competent institutions to solve problems related to the exploration of economic information. Activities carried out directly or indirectly complement each other within the general economic policy of the region.

It is obvious that Very Small Enterprises (VSE), which are an important fringe of the business fabric and represent more than half the companies registered with the central register of commerce (HCP Data), have often neither the skills nor the means to search the web for what can help their growth.

Hence, there is a need to make readily available for them a proximity internet portal that can possibly accommodate young investors or project holders to provide them with useful information on the economic offer in the region: granted benefits, useful addresses, databases, implementation guides, etc. At the same time, the emergence of the concept of networked enterprises and the increasing share of e-commerce in trade have led

to major changes in the economic field resulting in a greater dependence of the enterprise on its immediate environment.

Regions can play a leading role in this field by working for the expansion of proximate internet services. This digital network is not just a mere mass information media. It is a decentralizing medium that allows horizontal communication between members of the same interest group or community.

### **Regional economic organisations in line with ICT: What is the model for the regional investment center in Agadir?**

The key objective of regions, established in 1997, is to encourage investment opportunities. However, these entities cannot achieve this unless they are equipped with efficient instruments to carry out their development policy. The end justifies setting up satellite organizations in the region responsible for supporting economic development, such as the Regional Investment Center (RIC) (This is also the example of two agencies for the promotion and economic and social development of the provinces in northern and southern Morocco).

These regional agencies have legal personality and financial autonomy, and work under the authority of the Prime Minister. They study and propose economic and social programs to the authorities as part of an overall strategy for the development of these regions. It is their responsibility to seek funding for the implementation of projects and take part in it. A strong point justifying its importance is its leadership in promoting investment as well as the collection and dissemination of economic information to investors.

The RIC-SM was established by a joint decree of the Ministers of Home Affairs, Finance, Trade and Industry (Official Bulletin No. 5044, 2002a), following a letter of King Mohamed VI on January 9, 2002 on decentralizing investment management (Official Bulletin No. 4970, 2002b). The RIC has three departments (Figure 1).

The Business Start-up Assistance Department provides investors with the necessary documents showing their businesses are active. This takes a very short time since the RIC has easy access to a number of agents from the Trade and Industry Division, Regional Department of Inland Revenue, the Court of First Instance, the Division of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and the Certification Service. RIC-SM intranet connection to the Moroccan Office of Industrial and Commercial Property (MOICP) allows getting the negative certificate on the spot, a substantial gain in time and movement for the investor.

The agents working for the services listed earlier send the information at their hand. The server application of the RIC receives it and stores it in its database. A sketch of the data flow to the server is shown in Figure 2. The

Investor Assistance Department creates databases following the category of visitors. The first category is for information seekers, and allows close monitoring to identify potential promoters and encourage them to invest in the region. The second category is for license applicants. It allows sorting by categories the projects that obtained licenses, and working out a database of the procedures for license application. Claims and litigations constitute a third database. It includes different kinds of litigation requests and their corresponding responses.

ICT is a key factor such that an entire department within the RIC is dedicated to it "the Department of Promotion and Cooperation". This takes in charge publications, produces communication media and distributes them in order to advertise the economic and human potential of the region. Such decentralized communication goes hand in hand with other roles, namely support for setting up businesses and assistance to investors.

### **The website of the regional investment center**

The website of RIC-SM was designed in November 2002. Its funding depends on the operating and intervention budget. The website receives an average of 5,000 visitors a month, mainly foreigners and especially the French. Its graphics indicate two objectives: to facilitate investment through two distinct web spaces (creator space and investor space), providing some electronic forms, and to promote the Souss-Massa region.

The RIC-SM website is available in four languages (Arabic, French, English and Spanish), but only the French can access all content, including forms. The site provides entrepreneurs with strategic information, in particular the cost of the factors of production, market data covering eleven economic sectors, territorial profiles for each of the prefectures and provinces in the region and guides for business setup and investment.

In 2016, the RIC-SM set up a new interactive web portal ([www.agadirinvest.com](http://www.agadirinvest.com)) that better meets the need for information about promoting investment in the region.

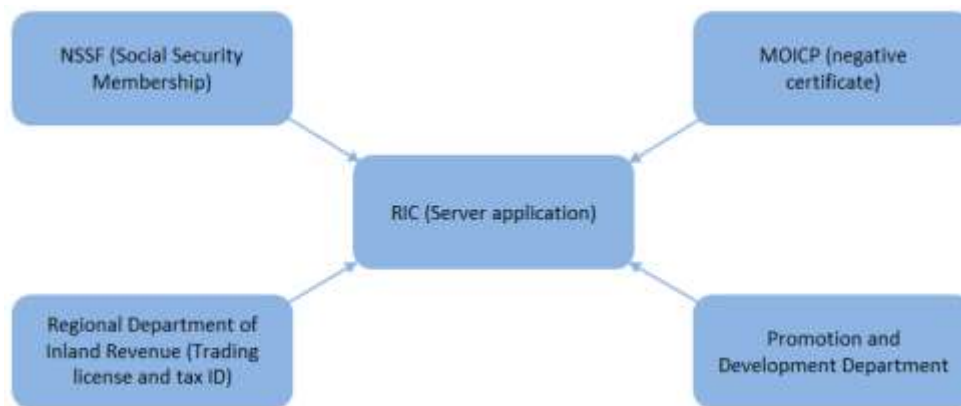
### **The observatory of the regional economy**

The creating of an economic observatory for the market started from the will to rely on good knowledge of the environment where economic operators work. This is a typical example of the direct intervention of the region in favor of the business fabric locally.

"The main purpose of the observatory is to facilitate access to information useful for the design and implementation of investment attraction policies as well as for prospective or evaluative studies necessary for



**Figure 1.** Organization structure of RIC-SMD.  
Source: The RIC-SM.



**Figure 2.** Data delivering process from client computer to server.  
Source: The RIC-SM).

them" (Our translation, Alaoui, 2013).

In this respect, a newsletter is issued which was reported in local economic news, information, and services provided to businesses. This measure was recommended in the five-year plan for economic and social development 2000 to 2004: "The region needs to assert itself as an investment magnet. As such, the first step to improve the overall environment for investment must be the availability of socioeconomic information of high quality; therefore, setting up a socio-economic observatory is pressing" (Our translation, *ibid.*).

In 2003, the RIC-SM established a business intelligence body called the observatory of regional economy. This is a continuously updated database to provide entrepreneurs with a collection of statistics about private investment. The collection consists of the data processed by the RIC services and surveys conducted in collaboration with the prefectures and provinces of the Souss-Massa region and technical services involved in the investment process. The editions of the RIC observatory are published in four newsletters available in digital and paper formats.

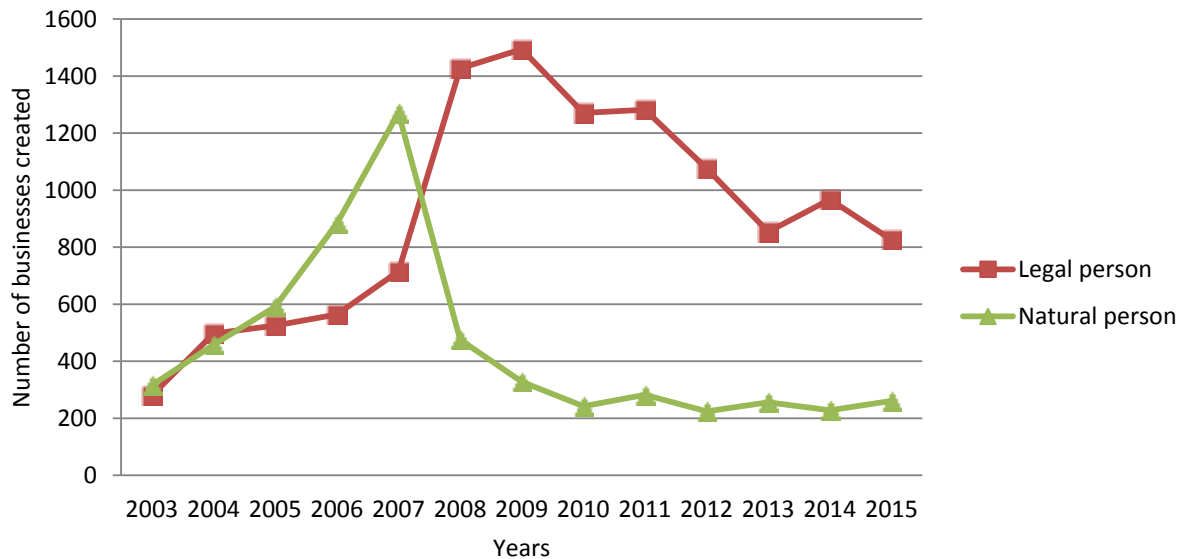
The approach developed by the observatory relies on several indicators grouped under different categories and the data of which relates to two main underlying

lines: investment and business set-up. The Observatory for Regional Investment makes an inventory of the projects completed or underway starting from 2002 by provinces and prefectures, by sector (tourism, industry, real estate, trade and services) and by year of completion. The observatory of entrepreneurship in turn identifies investment projects by legal form as shown in Figure 3.

**The strategic watch unit of the regional investment center**

The strategic watch unit is the third part of the communication strategy of the RIC-SM, allowing the dissemination of economic information to a wide audience from entrepreneurs to regional partners. In this respect, we mention the biannual newsletter of RIC-Agadir News, annual reports of activities and weekly newsletters CRI-Echos. The biannual newsletter RIC-Agadir News is a communication medium available in digital and paper formats. It reports on the major events related to investment in the region.

*RIC-Agadir News* is distributed to businesses, professional associations, and regional, national and



**Figure 3.** Investments distribution following project legal form.  
Source: BilanofRIC-SM 2015).

international public institutions. "The major aspects developed and analyzed in this medium include institutional and regulatory aspects, sector development, physical infrastructure, human resources, changes in the costs of the factors of production, upgrading the regional economy, the benchmark with other territories ..." (Alaoui, 2013).

Since 2004, the RIC has periodically published activity reports that identify investment projects validated or broken down by sectors, permits and negative certificates issued, and a summary of its activities (events, studies, training, cooperation measures and partnership, etc). Since September 2011, the RIC-SMD has also published a weekly newsletter called CRI-Echos. This communication tool reviews economic news to keep in touch with permanent partners and potential investors.

"By issuing this medium, the RIC-SMD team, (...), wants to confirm the increasingly prominent role of RIC, not only as an administrative actor (...) but also as a regional expert in the analysis, recommendation and participation in the implementation of coherent and dynamic economic development strategies" (Our translation, *ibid.*). Thus, sixty-eight CRI-Echos newsletters were issued between 2011 and 2016.

The information services that RIC-SM offers are mainly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). They rely on means of intervention adapted to the needs of research and the analysis of economic and market data. However, the interventions of the RIC-SM with companies and investors are driven more by emergency than a specific plan for the region. It is more of a cyclical activity than a planned policy.

The interventions of the RIC-SM need to be integrated in a decentralized procedure of economic information.

Souss-Massa region does not have a newsletter to report economic information locally gathered, as some metropolitan municipalities such as Casablanca, Rabat, Meknes and Tangiers do in their local newspapers. The lack of will to conquer this field is due not only to the lack of human and material resources but also to political considerations.

Like other regional economic activities, the search for and distribution of information are subject to the prior approval of the state. In this system, where the meetings of the Regional Council are closely supervised, how and to what extent can public managers in the region carry out their business skills? Strengthening devolution at the expense of decentralization through different constitutional reforms, the last of which dates back to 2002, by establishing regional centers for investment, further reduces the ground of local authorities and municipalities while these can play a significant role in economic development.

In this context, communication appears as a strategic factor in the channels that determine business location. Today a large region needs to have a service for information and structured economic orientation and conduct investigations to reveal its agents' preferences.

Communication policy should be consistent with the image of the region. Agadir can be presented as the first tourist city of Morocco, a qualifier that many observers recognize or accept, while other cities cannot claim a similar qualification. Therefore, there is a need to highlight the specificities of the region within an economic development outlook and see how aspects of the regional identity can be paired with the local products to strengthen the links between image and local resources.

With consideration to the controlling the actions at the Regional Council in Morocco, the region's decision-making powers are confined to the collection and dissemination of collecting and giving economic data to investors and businesses restricting its power to only make proposals. The liberalization of economic opportunities in the region depends on the elimination or at least easing control. This reform is justified today by the fact that the region is subject to other forms of softer control, namely administrative courts and regional courts of auditors.

### **ICT and the challenge of regional economic development: what advances for Souss-Massa region?**

In an environment that is increasingly unstable because of the succession of economic crises, information becomes the nerve of economic clashes that now territories indulge in. It is also a strategic product whose development, processing and dissemination should no longer be the local community's hands. In Morocco, despite the relatively high awareness of the role of local economic information in stimulating investment, this sector has for the moment no priority and still suffers from slow development. This is a failure that needs correction to better institutionalize economic governance of local authorities in Morocco.

Souss-Massa region bears the scars of creative destruction that the Austrian economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter proposed. It is the theatre where two concurrent processes are taking place: the decline of traditional activities and the rise of a structured economy around ICT. The regional development in this sphere is witnessed by the emergence, growth and attracting potential of firms.

In these conditions, prior to mastering ICT requires putting an end to the harmful scheme of the local context by providing appropriate infrastructure to make it a support medium and allow companies to develop and grow there. To this end, the structural facilities need to open up this marginalized space to be protected against any centralizing effect of the means of collecting and communicating economic information. "Though, some studies have shown the accuracy of this hypothesis, namely that the more a region has communication options, the more attractive to outside companies it becomes" (Laramée, 1990). Additionally, this would promote the economic role of the region that should come before all other policies or even condition them.

There is also a direct correlation between the development of communication technologies and the emergence of new regional businesses. In this respect, ICT is a source of endogenous development. Remote communication between local businesses generates new regional networks for economic solidarity. By knowing the

supply and demand for goods and services on a regional database, it is reasonable to expect the emergence of new companies to meet the demand of this region characterized by the predominance of a single activity and is constantly subject to economic risks whose variables are impossible to control.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of a region is closely linked to economic development and promoting investment. From this perspective, the logic of decentralization considers communication as an ex-ante will and a vehicle that determines the location of firms. Information technology coupled with the process of regionalization represents an opportunity to establish lasting relationships between the producers and users economic information at regional level.

It is possible to underline two obstacles that stand against the exploration of economic information at the regional level: the absence of a documentation and information center created by and for the region, and the lack of specialized information, which makes it difficult to process and spread data on various aspects of the regional economy. This is further compounded by the scarcity of economic information at the level of the communities forming the region.

In the region of Souss-Massa, whatever the quality of investment opportunities and proposals, they may be less productive if they are not coupled with and supported by a strategy and a clear and consistent communication system. The Regional Investment Center for, as an agency with a crosscutting vocation, is an essential element of the proposed offer by this region. Its role should be highlighted in any communication strategy directed to the investor because what is difficult to implement at the national level appears feasible in a regional context. Countries that succeed in attracting foreign investment are those that follow, among other things, a single window approach.

Regional investment centers were established as single windows in each region to develop development policies for these territories. Large national macroeconomic actions give way to a local and microeconomic approach to cooperation with companies now considered as partners. The information on the opportunities in the territory is a strategic tool of this policy. The regional framework may be the most appropriate territorial dimension, given the means it has to solve problems related to the collection and dissemination of economic information, a privileged tool for growth.

In Morocco, local communities are becoming a major player in the economic and social development of the territory. To fulfill this mission effectively, they should be equipped with the necessary tools. In order to fulfill its

primary mission, the RIC-SM accumulates a new function: overcoming barriers to entrepreneurial performance in the region in the era of information and communication technologies. By not confining itself to its single window, the RIC-SM does not neglect its mission. It is at the forefront of regional economic thinking in its broadest perspective.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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