



# Morocco, a regional player in Africa

By Mourad Arbib 

MOROCCO HAS DISTINGUISHED ITSELF IN THE HEALTH CRISIS' CONTEXT BY BEING ONE OF THE FIRST COUNTRIES TO CLOSE ITS BORDERS TO THE REST OF THE WORLD IN ORDER TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF THE COVID-19 VIRUS. THIS INITIATIVE COULD HAVE SAVED THOUSANDS OF LIVES.

The pandemic was an opportunity for Morocco to continue to play its role as a leader in Africa. While many countries were withdrawing, Morocco did not hesitate to provide sanitary aid to 15 African countries: hydroxychloroquine, hydroalcoholic gel, masks, and respirators all manufactured in Morocco.

How did Morocco manage to establish its status as an African leader without being the continent's leading economic power?

The political initiatives implemented by HM King Mohammed VI and the development of economic relations with the continent through major companies that became pan-African benefited Moroccan influence on the continent.

Morocco rejoined the African Union (AU) in 2017 after leaving it in 1984 and having been one of the founders in 1963. Indeed, refusing to cohabit with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Kingdom decided to leave the organization and relied on countries that did not recognize it. The empty chair policy that ensued inhibited its influence and allowed

South Africa and Algeria to weigh in on the question of Western Sahara. But after decades of reflection, Morocco decided to rejoin the AU, because as HM King Mohammed VI puts it "when a body is sick, it is better cared for from the inside than from the outside". In 2016, diplomatic trips were made to African capitals to set out a vision of collaboration between Morocco and African countries and multiply cooperation and investment agreements. In January 2017, Morocco's return to the AU was voted by 39 member states out of 54.

Moroccan multinational companies are examples of the country's development in Africa. They invigorated various African sectors with more than 60% of Moroccan foreign direct investments in African countries.

The NIC (National Investment Company), merged with NAO (North-African Omnium) in 2010, which historically was an industrial holding company and has gradually shifted towards secondary and tertiary economic activities, illustrating Morocco's desire to implement



extensive economic development. The holding company owns subsidiaries such as Attijariwafa Bank group, Nareva, Optorg, or Managem, achieving a geographic change by developing and increasing its presence at the continental level. This is how in 2018, the industrial holding company has been transformed into a pan-African investment company, renamed Al Mada. For example, Attijariwafa Bank, already present in 25 countries in Africa, distinguished itself in 2016 with the acquisition of Barclays in Egypt, allowing Morocco to be the country's leading foreign investor that year. Or more recently, Nareva established its first investment outside Morocco at the start of the year by partnering with Engie for the construction of a photovoltaic power plant in Gafsa in Tunisia.

As another example, OCP group that has celebrated its centenary and exploits the largest sources of phosphate in the world, has today diversified into processed products and represents Morocco's desire to develop towards a continental market. OCP is one of the world's leader in the production of fertilisers and has created OCP Africa, a subsidiary which goal is to promote the development of agriculture at a local level. In practice, OCP has created 12 subsidiaries to be present in 16 countries in Central, West and East Africa. A strategy is implemented in countries that have diverse

climates to develop their agricultural sector even if it has been a challenge historically. OCP has contributed to change agricultural activities in Africa thanks to suitable fertilisers, assistance to farmers, but above all, significant investments in production and logistics infrastructure. The development of a fertiliser plant and the construction of a distribution network in Nigeria is one illustration of that work.

Global firms understood that Morocco could be an entry point to set foot in Africa as Orange (France) acquiring Meditel, Etisalat (UAE) acquiring Maroc Telecom and its African subsidiaries, Taqa (UAE) opening its African hub in Morocco, or LafargeHolcim Maroc-Afrique, the fruit of a joint venture between the cement global leader and Al Mada fostering new businesses in 12 African countries.

The development of diplomatic relations between Morocco and African countries has been built on concrete actions. HM King Mohammed VI has decided to implement a diplomatic, social, and economic vision, which is fully executed by Moroccan companies on the continent, contributing to its role as an African leader. Morocco is contributing to the success of South-South collaborations, gradually making Africa its first region of activity.

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