

Beyond Morocco's Green Success Story: Analysing Actor-Interests and Deforestation under the "Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco"

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

actor-interests, deforestation, development collaboration, forest governance, forest policy, green development, Morocco, symbolic politics

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Morocco's reputation as an African role model for sustainable development and climate action is widely supported by progressive environmental policies, strong representation, and close partnerships with international donors. This paper critically examines why – despite limited tangible results, most notably, persistent deforestation and social challenges – Morocco continues to capture substantial development financing for forest, social, and economic policies aligned with global green development ambitions. The analysis focuses on a recent forest policy – the 'Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco' – as a case. It draws on a theoretical framework combining actors' formal and informal interests and Edelman's theory of symbolic politics. Political actors are driven by both formal and informal interests, the latter explaining how they may continue to benefit from policies despite gaps between discourse and outcomes. Further, Edelman's theory of symbolic politics suggests that actors employ symbolic reassurances to conceal failures and advance these informal interests. Combining interviews, field observations, grey literature, and deforestation data, we demonstrate that the Strategy functions as a gateway for foreign actors to showcase engagement in their sustainability agendas and ergo caters to their strategic interest to legitimate access to energy and migration control on the Moroccan level. Further, the Moroccan forest administration leverages the Strategy for fund acquisition and project supervision. However, Hansen's global forest change dataset indicates that deforestation more than doubled in the five years after the Strategy's release in 2020, compared to the previous five-year period. Nevertheless, narratives of the leading actors are centred around the Strategy's success, tangible mostly at administrative levels, as it enabled collaborations, set relevant goals, and attracted funding. We conclude that, rather than substantive improvements, strategic interests drive international acclaim and donor engagement. As the success narrative camouflages the perpetuation of sustainability issues, like deforestation and structural barriers to civic participation, the dynamic mirrors aspects of Edelman's 'symbolic trap', namely 'symbolic reassurance', 'persistence without tangible results regarding ongoing issues', and 'weak opposition'. This interest-focused analysis calls for a more critical assessment of policy impacts in the presence of success stories.

INTRODUCTION

Within Africa, Morocco has positioned itself as an aspiring leader in international green development efforts. Through its progressive environmental policies and amplified partnerships, the country cultivates considerable soft power (Nicolai 2022). Morocco actively participates in global forums and is often held up as a model for sustainable development, particularly regarding climate action (Agence Marocaine de Presse 2020; Nicolai 2022; European Commission 2022; Hibapress 2024; KfW 2025; Maboudi and D'Amico 2025). An important step to achieve this was hosting COP22 (2016) in Marrakech, six months after the signature ceremony of the Paris Agreement. During COP22, industrial countries reaffirmed their commitment of USD 100 billion to global climate action (UNFCCC 2016)¹. Since then, Morocco solidified partnerships and its reputation as a role model regarding climate action, as Frans Timmermans, the European Commission's Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal, affirms with the following statement about the EU-Morocco Green Partnership

“Morocco is a leader in Africa when it comes to the fight against the climate crisis and environmental degradation. The Green Partnership that we have concluded today harnesses our joint commitment to take action against climate change and to grasp the economic opportunities inherent in the green transition.” (European Commission 2022)

Morocco was also elected president of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in early 2025 (MAP 2025) and vice president of the United Nations Forum of Forests in 2024 (Medias24 2024).

With this successful positioning, Morocco continues to attract significant flows of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and collaborates with a growing number of international donors and aid agencies (Olivie and Pérez 2016; Dennaye 2023). Between 2003 and 2018, Morocco received over USD 1.2 billion for climate-related projects (UNOPS 2024), which is needed as the domestic investment in climate and sustainable land-use is insufficient to meet mitigation targets. Morocco's Nationally Determined Contribution, for example, estimates that USD 21.5 billion of

¹ The amount was tripled to USD 300 billion at COP29 (UNFCCC 2024) and is expected to remain relevant despite discussions of a possible U.S. withdrawal after the 2024 elections (Pullins and Knijnenburg 2025).

international climate finance are required to meet set goals (IMF 2023), which represents 55.41% of the total budget.

Despite the ongoing inflow of ODA, Morocco continues to face significant sustainability challenges, notably in addressing social inequality and the impact of climate change (Faysse 2015; Essatte 2018; Benamar 2021; Serbouti et al. 2023). Due to consecutive years of drought, the country endures a severe water crisis, which even led to the advice of the sovereign King Mohamed VI that Moroccans should abstain from sacrificing sheep during the 2025 Eid al-Adha, the most important religious feast (Reuters 2025).² Droughts affect agriculture in particular, a key pillar of the national economy. Simultaneously, anthropogenic pressure and forest fires pose risks to the Monarchy's forest ecosystems (Serbouti et al. 2023). These pressures disproportionately affect rural populations, who rely on agriculture, grazing, and forest resources for their livelihoods (Thivet and Blinda 2011; Ameur et al. 2017; Laaribya and Alaoui 2017).

The claims of Morocco's successful environmental governance are, therefore, contradicted by evidence of serious ecological and social damages to the Moroccan environment and land-use systems, including forests. Policies, including environmental policies, are known to expand the power basis of strong political actors (Krott 2005, p.31) while, formally, they are tools to address socially relevant problems (Andrews 2022b). It is known that actors' interests influence policy implementation and the achievement of policy goals (Krott 2005; Pamme and Grunow 2017; Rahman et al. 2017; Andrews 2022a). However, although Morocco is considered a role model case, little research has thematised the links between environmental policies and powerful actors' interests (including the consolidation of power) and how such interests influence policy implementation and the resolution of pressing environmental issues. This research gap drives our research questions (RQs):

RQ1- Granted the persisting sustainability issues in Morocco, why do political actors refer to Morocco as a role model case in green development?

RQ2- Which specific aspects of environmental policy satisfy which interests of strong international and national actors?

RQ3- How does this interest-satisfaction impact the narrative of success and the resolution of sustainability issues?

² This must be seen as a drastic measure as it has only occurred a few times in the history of Islamic countries and severely impacts the revenues of shepherds in Morocco.

To answer the research questions, we selected a recent example of environmental policy, the forest policy “Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco”. This strategy is a suitable case to assess information for the stated questions, because it represents a platform of collaboration between strong domestic and international political actors, as it became a venue for multiple donor projects soon after its launch in 2020 (EU 2022; GIZ 2023; World Bank 2023; AFD 2025). Further, the “2020-2030 Strategy Forests of Morocco” (hereafter referred to as '2030 Forest Strategy', 'Forest Strategy', and 'Strategy') aims to address socially relevant sustainability issues, the climatic and anthropogenic pressure on Moroccan forests (ANEF 2020b). Among the four main goals of the Forest Strategy (Results, Table 1), the foremost is to restructure the forest administration’s participative approach in order to consider population needs and limit forest offenses causing deforestation (ANEF 2020a; Kanabi 2021). Despite these set goals and Morocco’s reputation, two aspects characterise the case: 1- unsatisfactory impact of previous forest programs (Aubert et al. 2009; Mossedaq et al. 2022) and 2- increasing pressures on environment and rural communities. In this context, our research aims to study which interests of strong actors are at play and how they impact policy implementation and, more widely, the resolution of sustainability issues such as deforestation. Analysing the interplay of these aspects can deliver valuable insights into current tendencies of donor-driven green development, including policy loopholes, especially since Morocco is considered a role model case.

FOREST POLITICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Moroccan climate and forests

Located in the Mediterranean basin – a globally recognised biodiversity hotspot (CEPF 2025), Morocco harbours a remarkable diversity of plant and animal species, supported by a wide range of minerals and soil types (Louz et al. 2022; Serbouti et al. 2023). As in the entire Mediterranean region, Morocco’s vulnerability to climate change is enhanced, with droughts becoming increasingly severe and frequent in recent years (Schilling et al. 2012; Treguer et al. 2018).

Moroccan forests and woodlands span nearly nine million hectares, predominantly occurring in the north and along the Atlas Mountains, but also in the centre-west (ANEF 2020a; Serbouti et al.

2023). Forests harbour numerous endemic and threatened plant and animal species (Znari and Hichami 2018; ANEF 2020a), protect and regulate the country's agricultural sector, a main pillar of the Moroccan economy, as they shield soils from wind and water erosion, desertification, and regulate water cycles (Meliho et al. 2018). Additionally, forests contribute directly to about 1% of Morocco's GDP, with approximately seven million people, half the rural population, depending directly on forest products (Chebli et al. 2018; 2021; Serbouti et al. 2023; Statista 2025). As sources of forage, forests supply up to 17% of livestock diets and 32% of cattle browse and are hence indispensable for traditional pastoral practices and central to Moroccan culture and cuisine (ANEF 2020a; Chebli et al. 2021).

Despite their importance, Moroccan forests face mounting pressures from human activities, including overgrazing, excessive firewood collection, and agricultural expansion, which exceed the land's capacity and drive degradation and loss of natural vegetation (ANEF 2020a; Chebli et al. 2018). Additionally, forest fires threaten forests as they caused 64.1% of tree cover loss between 2001 and 2024 (GFW 2025). In response to the decade-long presence of such threats, the kingdom's restoration efforts include a network of protected areas, counting ten national parks, 38 Ramsar wetlands, 146 sites of biological or ecological interest, and four biosphere reserves (Serbouti et al. 2023). Additionally, traditional land management systems such as Agdal, which allow for natural regeneration, are being revived (Romagny et al. 2023), and recent policies such as the Forest Strategy seek to satisfy human needs and conservation in parallel (Naggar 2020). Nevertheless, recent research underlines that such efforts have not yet responded adequately to the hazards jeopardising Moroccan forests, which would demand addressing the root causes of degradation, including the needs and challenges of the rural population (Montanari and Bergh 2019; Romagny et al. 2023; Serbouti et al. 2023).

Theoretical framework

Our theoretical concept focuses on 'political actors' following the Weberian school of thought³ that understands political actors as strategic entities that employ power strategies to fulfil their interests (Krott et al. 2014; Zhao et al. 2022; Ongolo and Krott 2023) and are able to influence a

³ The Weberian school of thought postulates that, within social structures, individuals act to realize their values and interests through rational calculation. In this context the school states that actors legitimize their authority via tradition, charisma, and legal-rational systems, as core concepts of calculations that lead to the improvement of leading actors' position. (Kim 2024)

forest policy during its formulation and implementation (Schusser et al. 2015). We focus our analysis on the leading actors in the context of the Forest Strategy, namely a domestic state actor, the forest administration, and international organisations.

Domestic state actor - Forest administration. National Agency of Water and Forests (French acronym ANEF – Agence Nationale des Eaux et Forêts).

The forest administration ANEF is affiliated with the Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Rural Development, Water and Forests (French acronym MARPMDREF). It has its roots in Morocco's first bureaucratic forest administration, established as a colonial institution under the French protectorate, starting in 1912 (Zejly 2024). Since the 1990s, several reforms have intended a shift from a policing administration towards a more service-oriented approach (Aubert 2014). For a long time, these had little impact on legislation and practice (ibid.). In 2021, however, as part of the Forest Strategy's implementation, the previously named High Commissariat of Forests was reformed to "National Agency of Water and Forests" (Royaume du Maroc 2021).

Morocco's political context builds the fundament for ANEF's role in environmental governance and the implementation of the 2030 Forest Strategy. Morocco is a parliamentary monarchy, hence a hybrid government. In this specific context, the "*makhzen*" is defined as the apparatus of power around the sovereign, who holds supreme authority, transferring it to the minister and local authorities (Hill 2019). The MARPMDREF and the affiliated forest administration ANEF thus represent the *makhzen* in environmental governance, including the forest domain. It is further worth noting that the previous minister of the MARPMDREF, presently head of government, is one of the wealthiest individuals in Africa and released the agricultural policy "Green Morocco Plan" (2008), which was subject to controversies in the press and research (Faysse 2015; Asedrem 2021; Benamar 2021), due to its unintended impacts and neoliberal notion. In contrast to other North African countries, the *makhzen* administration is considered stable and functional. For this reason, the European Union granted Morocco the status of "Advanced Country" in 2008 (Hill 2019).

International organisations

To achieve its set sustainability goals, Morocco relies on international collaboration for financing and implementation, working with multiple types of donors and international aid agencies. International organisations are defined as "hierarchically organised group of civil servants with a

given mandate and resources within the context of a given policy area” (Biermann and Bauer 2004). In this context, Martens (2005) describes ‘foreign aid agencies’ as organisations that redistribute income, targeting recipients that live outside the donor country, typically in the Global South.

We found a total of nine international organisations that collaborate with the forest administration under the 2030 Forest Strategy. Each of the organisations formulated projects to support the implementation of the Strategy. A complete list of these organisations is included in the results section (Table 2). Most international organisations in question have been operating for decades in Morocco. Notably, Moroccan forest policies have increasingly responded to international policies since the mid-1990s, compromising local priorities, as Aubert (2014) notes.

Hypotheses

In line with the Weberian school of thought³, political actors conceptualise forest political programs like the Forest Strategy to improve their position, in other words, to enhance their power (Krott 2005, p.31). Here, power refers to an actor’s ability to pursue self-interests regardless of other actors’ wills (Krott et al. 2014). Foreign actors impact the formulation of national policies like the Forest Strategy by allocating financial assistance and technical advice, according to recent international research (Bernstein and Cashore 2012; Rahman et al. 2016; Rahman et al. 2017; Burns et al. 2017; Hasnaoui and Krott 2019; Knostmann 2021), which leads to a reflection of foreign goals in domestic policies. Such alignment of domestic policies to foreign objectives occurs along two key venues: The first venue involves foreign actors influencing domestic policies via 1- international rules, 2- international norms and discourse, 3- creation of or intervention in markets, and 4- direct access to domestic policy processes (Bernstein and Cashore 2012). The second venue unfolds when domestic actors actively adapt their policies to foreign goals, for example, by using gained knowledge on potential donors’ policy preferences, to increase their chances of continuously obtaining financial assistance (Hibou 1999; Ongolo 2015⁴).

‘Interests’, which are central to this analysis, are defined as the potential benefit an actor can derive from a resource, for example, forest lands or public financial resources (Krott et al. 2014; Rahman

⁴ Originally, Ongolo’s work refers to countries of limited statehood, which is not a suitable description for Morocco. However Ongolo’s argument is still applicable to the Moroccan case because at its core it describes how, in donor-recipient dynamics, domestic actors strategically adapt to external influence.

et al. 2017). In the context of policy formulation and implementation, actors actively showcase ‘formal interests’, for example, the promotion of social and ecological sustainability, because such philanthropic interests are socially acceptable and showcasing them boosts an actor’s reputation (Zhao et al. 2022). ‘Informal interests’, in contrast, serve the satisfaction of an actor’s self-interest (Rahman et al. 2017), such as the maximisation of revenues, comfort, and influence. Actors do not actively display or hide their informal interests, as they may conflict with social acceptance (Zhao et al. 2022). Granted that interests impact policy implementation and given the variety of Western donors present in the Moroccan forest sector, it is crucial to consider their formal and informal interests for understanding policy impacts. At the formal level, donors’ normative preferences, such as the support of reforms towards market efficiency or sustainability, prevail. However, to maintain and improve their position, donors also follow strategic regional foreign policy goals (Aurenhammer 2012). For example, as one of the southern Mediterranean EU partner countries, Morocco’s EU-donor relations date back to 1995 (EU 2008; Union for the Mediterranean 2020). Elucidating informal interests in this partnership, Hibou (1999) pointed out that the recipients were well aware of flexibility and opportunities for budget allocation, as long as they satisfy the EU’s main interests, notably migration-control and security. These represent prominent examples of informal interests, as leveraging funding and controlling migration cater to the foreign actors’ self-interests while covered by the formal partnership to foster development.

Given the variety of national and international actors and their specific objectives in the region and in the Moroccan forest sector, competing agendas appear unavoidable. This is reinforced by the fact that, instead of a coherent international treaty for forests, there is only a set of non-binding international agreements on forest land use and conservation with often conflicting views, enabling actors to cherry-pick goals (Smouts 2003; Humphreys 2007; Singer and Giessen 2017; Rodríguez Fernández-Blanco et al. 2019). Focusing on foreign actors’ interests, these entries construct the first hypothesis.

H1: The 2020-2030 Forest Strategy functions as a formal gateway that allows foreign actors to showcase engagement towards their preferred sustainability goals and, in parallel, enables foreign actors to pursue their strategic goals at the national level in Morocco.

The Moroccan forest administration represents the leading domestic actor, leveraging the Forest Strategy to improve its position. It is part of the *makhzen*⁵ apparatus and operates hierarchically, maintains decision-making power as a legitimate national actor, and is able to negotiate with foreign donors (Hill 2019). Through collaboration and negotiation, the forest administration is expected to informally seek to enhance both 1- financial inflow through international partnerships by adopting foreign donor's goals (Ongolo 2015), and 2- its agency, defined as the capacity to decide independently and strengthen its ability to bargain (Alden et al. 2018). These points constitute the basis for the second hypothesis.

H2: The Forest Strategy functions as a tool to reinforce the *makhzen*⁵ forest administration's position by 1- attracting foreign donors as collaboration partners and 2- a negotiation basis for the internationally funded implementation efforts.

H1 and H2 are potential answers to the second research questions RQ 2 – “Which specific aspects of environmental policy satisfy which interests of strong international and national actors?” and therefore also linked to the overarching research question RQ 1 – “Granted the persisting sustainability issues in Morocco, why do political actors refer to Morocco as a role model case in green development?”. As a theory-based answer to RQ 3 regarding the impact of the satisfaction of actors' interests on the resolution of sustainability issues and the promotion of success narratives, we construct H3.

H3: Persisting sustainability issues are camouflaged by a symbolic success-narrative regarding the 2030 Forest Strategy, which is promoted by international actors and the forest administration.

We link H3 to Edelman's theory of symbolic politics (1964; 1971) that states that political actors driven by the maximisation of their gains tend to hide policy inefficiency. This tendency becomes observable once a contradiction appears between the formally expressed policy objectives and actual outcomes (ibid.; Rasoamanana et al. 2025). The theory of symbolic politics hence describes a cost-efficient strategy of well-organised actors that create an illusion of action based on 1- the use of a set of strategic actions that rely on a symbol as a substantial communication tool and 2- combine the symbol with non-substantial and symbolic actions (Edelman 1964; 1971; Baudrillard

⁵ The *Makhzen* is defined as the apparatus of power around the Moroccan sovereign, who holds supreme authority as of the constitution and who transfers it to the ministers and the local authorities (Hill 2019) including the forest administration.

1981; Blühdorn 2007). Accordingly, actors capitalise on the created illusion as it allows them to secure resources to their benefit. Consequently, the symbolic action fails to address the root cause of the policy issue, which is also referred to as ‘symbolic trap’ (Edelman 1964; 1971; Rasoamanana et al., 2025). The section “Deforestation data” details why we selected the variable ‘deforestation’ as policy issue for analysing H3 (see also p. 219), and how deforestation interplays with anthropogenic pressure, and participation, as points of discussion, respectively.

Analytical framework and data sources

The first two hypotheses are centred around the formal and informal interests of powerful international (H1) and domestic actors (H2). Zhao et al. (2022) delivered a methodological approach for assessing these distinguished types of actors’ interest in forest governance. According to this approach, researchers can assess formal goals through interviews and documents (ibid.). Further, powerful actors’ informal interests can be inferred from observation of policy impacts, including influences at social and ecological levels, as well as fluctuations in the actors’ economic gains. (ibid.) For this reason, we combined data from interviews, policy and project-related grey literature, field observations, and deforestation data, as detailed below.

H1 suggests that the Forest Strategy functions as a formal gateway that allows foreign actors to showcase engagement towards their preferred sustainability goals and, in parallel, enables foreign actors to pursue their strategic goals at the national level in Morocco. To verify if evidence supports the first part of H1, we hence examined project literature for references regarding international sustainability frameworks such as the UN 2030 development agenda and regional partnerships. This included literature of donors’ pre-policy projects that contributed to the formulation of the Strategy and projects that serve to implement the Strategy. Then, we considered informal interests by observing the spending behaviour (Rahman et al. 2017) of European donors across sectors with attention to potential informal interests (e.g., expansion of influence, access to resources, migration control) and additional interview data. We consider H1 as supported by evidence if donors 1- link the Forest Strategy to their formal sustainability goals and 2- place emphasis on this sustainability engagement despite underlying expenditure patterns that reveal stronger financial engagement in rubrics catering to informal interests.

H2 suggests that the Forest Strategy functions as a tool to reinforce the *makhzen*⁵ forest administration’s position by 1- attracting foreign donors as collaboration partners and 2- a

negotiation basis for the implementation of internationally funded implementation efforts. To investigate whether H2 is supported by empirical evidence, we tracked collaborations between the forest administration and international actors before and after the Strategy's release at the level of policy formulation and implementation. Through interviews, direct observations and grey literature analysis, we give particular attention to identifying collaborations that enabled the administration to tailor the Strategy to the formal interests of donors prior to the policy's release; proactive measures to attract donor support for implementing projects following its launch; and management approaches designed to maintain administrative control over project implementation, even in the presence of strong foreign actors. The hypothesis is considered supported by evidence if prior collaborations enabled the administration to acquire knowledge regarding donor interests, if the strategy accommodates multiple projects in parallel, and if empirical evidence for continuous negotiation led by the administration is found in practice.

As we have above considered whether the policy satisfies the informal and formal interests of the powerful actors, we finally turn to how this interest-satisfaction impacts the creation of success narratives and the resolution of pressing sustainability issues. In this vein, H3 hypothesises that persisting sustainability issues are camouflaged by a symbolic success-narrative regarding the 2030 Forest Strategy, which international actors and the forest administration promote. Since environmental sustainability issues are multidimensional, we selected 'deforestation' as one concrete sustainability issue, i.e., analytical variable for H3. We chose this variable because in both global forest governance and the Moroccan context, deforestation is an urgent sustainability problem, and it is a core concern of the Moroccan Forest Strategy (ANEF 2020b). To test H3, we first assess how deforestation has changed on a national scale since the release of the Strategy. Then, we verify in the collected literature whether powerful actors consider any problematic trend of the deforestation when referring to the Strategy's impact or rather focus on forwarding its successes. H3 is considered supported if 1- Tree Cover Loss has either stagnated at the same rate or accelerated since the Strategy's release in 2020, and 2- if powerful actors' public communication underlines the success of the strategy while failing to recognise deteriorating forest conditions.

Qualitative data sources

Based on a first round of field research in 2023, the 2030 Forest Strategy was selected as a case study because it addresses pressing environmental issues and attracted multiple donors within a short period, making it a recent, relevant, and prestigious example of Moroccan environmental policy and international collaboration. Empirical data for testing the hypothesis were collected through a mixed-methods approach, combining data assessed via field research, targeted desk research (including grey literature and deforestation data, refer to the paragraph on deforestation data), and analogue grey literature. Field research included collecting data via observations in multiple locations of administrative and forest regional relevance, via semi-structured interviews with key actors (elite interviews), and collecting analogue grey literature during 2023 and 2024.

After identifying relevant actors based on interviews, we sought more specific grey literature concerning: 1- international forest policy projects implemented in the decade before the Strategy's launch, 2- the international projects under the Strategy, mostly found on donors' official pages; and 3- press releases, reports, and policy documents regarding the Strategy from Moroccan actors. This way, a comprehensive list of the involved donor projects (Results, Table 2) and a set of detailed project documents was completed. To assess data for testing H1, we additionally assessed publicly available reports of European donors to observe expenditure of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in other rubrics than green development. In total, 72 project documents, legal texts, state actor reports, online newspaper articles, press releases, and policy documents were collected for the analysis (Appendix Table I).

To verify information and complete potential gaps, we triangulated the data from document analysis with data obtained from interviews and observations, and vice versa (Neuman 2014). Interviews were crucial for assessing the forest administration's management practices around donor project acquisition and negotiation, necessary for testing H2. Since claims on paper regarding such implementation can contradict real implementation measures, we confirmed the activities through multiple independent sources. We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with key officials from state, international, association, and academic organisations (Appendix Table II). We asked open-ended questions about the advances and obstacles in the implementation of current projects, venues for citizen participation, fund acquisition procedures, dynamics with collaborating partners, and advances and impact of reforms. Coordination practices showed

recurring themes across respondents, indicating saturation. For example, representatives of international agencies and forest administration consistently described the biannual coordination meetings and the use of pilot projects.

During the interview process, no personal data were gathered, and anonymisation and confidential treatment of all information shared was assured to the interviewees. Notes were coded with location and date, kept in a field journal, and later digitised. In line with the confidentiality statement, interviews conducted in smaller towns were coded with reference to the region instead of the town name.

Deforestation data

Assessing evidence for testing H3 required national-scale deforestation data. We selected the variable ‘deforestation’ because it is particularly urgent in Morocco and a focal point of the Forest Strategy and, therefore, represents a crucial dimension of the Forest Strategy’s impact on sustainability issues. As a national forest monitoring system is absent in Morocco (Serbouti et al. 2023), deforestation data based on the annually updated Hansen et al. dataset, available on the platform Global Forest Watch (GFW), represents an alternative source (Curtis et al. 2018; Boubekraoui et al. 2023). We, therefore, used data from this set to assess deforestation trends after the Strategy’s release in January 2020. In Morocco, deforestation is largely driven by anthropogenic pressures and is therefore closely linked to the livelihoods and practices of forest-adjacent communities (Serbouti et al. 2023).

The Strategy seeks to address the intertwined issue of deforestation, anthropogenic pressure, and the dependence of the rural population on forest resources by strengthening local participation (ANEF 2020a; Kanabi 2021). Unlike Tree Cover Loss (TCL), which is available nationwide, participation studies are unusually detailed case studies and cannot be generalised from local to national scale. However, in Morocco, participation in the policy process is constrained by structural, nationwide obstacles, which we critically consider in the discussion section, while deforestation metrics, TCL in kilo hectares (kha) per year, are examined in the results section.

RESULTS

Roots of the Strategy: influence of foreign donor priorities on Moroccan forest policy design

Before the ‘Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco’ was released, two donor-led projects on forest policy formulation took place in Morocco between 2010 and 2021 (Figure 1, blue boxes). The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) financed the first project, named “Adaptation of Forest Political Frame”, while its affiliate aid agency German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) coordinated the project’s implementation. The second project, “Support of Forest Policy in Morocco”, was financed by the EU. Implementation phases were 2010-2015 and 2013-2021, respectively (Figure 1).

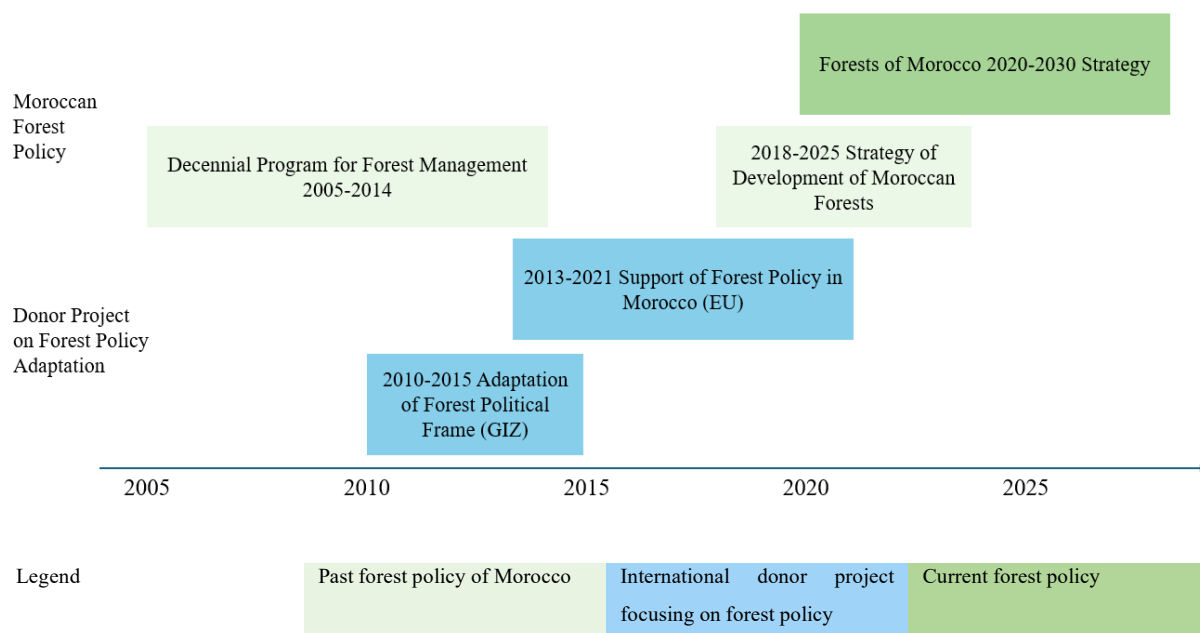


Figure 1. Moroccan forest policies and international projects on forest policy adaptation since 2010.

The BMZ/GIZ project, a regional initiative, aimed to support Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries to reform forest policy towards “*Service oriented state forest administrations*” (GIZ 2010). In this initiative, GIZ closely collaborated with the UN-FAO-affiliated network *Silva Mediterranea* in which Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries connect (FAO 2025). The project in Morocco was hence part of a large initiative, encouraging networking and channelling resources for forest development to various countries in the Mediterranean. In this vein, the project’s evaluation includes indicators focusing on the integration of climate change in the forest

policies of the recipients (GIZ 2015, p. 2). These indicators show GIZ sought to directly shape recipient countries' domestic policies. For Morocco, the project documentation (ibid.) states that it developed a forest policy for the time frame 2015-2024 under the GIZ initiative and forecasts that the kingdom would practically implement 85% of the strategy. However, Morocco did not launch a forest-specific strategy until 2018, three years after the GIZ project's end. Despite the gap of three years, the GIZ project likely influenced the forest policy in question, the *2018-2025 Forest Development Strategy* (Tantaoui 2017; Mossedaq et al. 2022). GIZ project literature states that the initiative was particularly successful in Morocco, especially regarding policy formulation, networking, new potential projects, gender equality, and enhanced efforts on public relations (GIZ 2015). Rationally, such a collaboration enabled the domestic partner, the forest administration, to get acquainted with the donor's goals and priorities.

The EU financed the second donor project on forest policy adaptation in Morocco, namely the project "Support of Forest Policy in Morocco" (2013-2021). The project's first phase (2013-2018) aimed at updating the legislative forest political frame, including its strategic aspects (EU 2018). The promotion of equitable benefit sharing was at the core of this legislative and strategic reform (ibid). In line with the EU's reform-oriented approaches, the kingdom's forest policy released in 2018 lists among its overarching goals the "*Institutional reform of the sector through the creation of the Water and Forests Agency*" and the "*Creation of a new model based on a participatory approach*" (Mossedaq et al. 2022, Table 1). These two goals mirror the EU projects' focus on participation and equity reforms. It is also in line with the aim of the BMZ/GIZ project to develop a service-oriented administration.

In 2020, only two years after the release of the 2018-2025 strategy, the Moroccan King, Mohamed VI, replaced it with new strategy, the "Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco" (MARPMDREF 2020). Both strategies have four objectives, appearing notably similar (Table 2). What was the reason for replacing the 2018 strategy five years before it reached its formal end? A first potential reason is that in 2021, the Moroccan forest administration reformed from *High Commissariat of Forests* to *National Agency of Water and Forests* (Royaume du Maroc 2021). This change represents the achievement of the administrative objective formulated in the 2018 strategy. Another potential reason is that the new 2020-2030 policy is a step of harmonisation with donor-relevant policies, that operate until the 2030 horizon, especially the 2030 UN sustainable

development agenda, the European Green Deal⁶ and the EU Forest Strategy for 2030 (European Commission 2021).

Table 1. Time frame and objectives of Morocco's national forest strategies since 2018.

Morocco's National Forest Strategies since 2018		
Forest program title	Strategy of Development of Moroccan Forests	Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco
Time frame	2018-2024	2020-2030
Objectives		
Ecological objective	1. Management and development of forest areas according to their purpose	1. Differentiate and develop the areas according to their purpose, reforestation
Social objective	2. Creation of a new model based on a participatory approach	2. Reinvent and structure the participatory approach
Economic objective	3. Development and modernisation of forest professions	3. Invest in and modernise the core of the forest profession
Administrative objective	4. Institutional reform of the sector through the creation of the Water and Forests Agency	4. Rebuild the institutional framework of the sector

References: Tantaoui (2017); Mossedaq et al. (2022); ANEF (2020a); Agence Marocaine de Presse (2020); ANEF (2020b); el Kanabi (2021); Mossedaq et al. (2022).

A detailed comparison of the strategies is difficult, as official policy documents are not publicly available. In fact, the absence of an official policy document is not solely the case for forest policies in Morocco, but was also encountered by Benamar (2021) for the case of the agricultural policy “Green Morocco Plan” (French: Plan Maroc Vert, PMV):

“The PMV was presented as a PowerPoint and has remained nothing more than a few bullet points.”

Comparably, the 2030 Forest Strategy was launched as a PowerPoint presentation by the government, presented, recorded, and published as a YouTube video (ANEF 2020b). The bullet points regarding the Strategy's objectives appear in reports of the forest administration

⁶ While the European Green deal covers the period until 2050, 2030 is an important target year especially regarding energy (European Commission 2025).

(MARPMDFEF 2020) and are repeated by the press (for example, Jnina 2025; Redaction du Telquel 2025). However, information regarding detailed implementation, timing, and financing of the Strategy are not publicly available in one comprehensive document. In fact, substantial parts of the Strategy's implementation are fragmented into multiple foreign donor projects, as the following section will illustrate.

Coordination of foreign donor projects under the Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco

The collected data from grey literature and interviews shows that, within five years after the launch of the Forest Strategy in 2020, the Moroccan forest administration, along with nine international organisations, launched ten projects with a total financial volume of EUR 702.475 million (Table 2). The administration hence collaborates with a variety of allies, enabling the mobilisation of foreign financial resources for implementing the Strategy.

Table 2. Donor projects under the “Strategy Forests of Morocco 2020-2030”. Donors, main objectives, and funding.

n	Donor	Project name and time frame	EUR* Million**	Reference
Multilateral donors				
1	European Investment Bank (EIB)	Inclusive and durable forest management	100 (loan)	EIB (2023)
2	European Union	Al Ard Al Khadraa - Terre verte	115 (loan)	EU (2022)
3	World Bank	Operation climat	277.5 (USD 300m) (loan)	World Bank (2023a)
4	World Bank	Development program of the blue economy	4.1 (USD 5m) (loan)	World Bank (2023c)
5	African Development Bank (AfDB)	Appui au Développement Inclusif et Durable des Zones Forestières (PADIDZOF)	84 (loan)	AfDB (2024)
6	FAO United Nations (UN)	Appui à la Stratégie « Forêts du Maroc 2020-2030 »	0.175 (grant)	FAO (2024)
Bilateral donors				
7	France, AFD	Ghabati Hayati – Ma forêt Ma vie	104.8 (grant)	AFD et al. (n. d.)
8	Germany, BMZ and GIZ	Green Jobs II	5.5 (grant)	GIZ (2023a), (ANEF 2024a)
9	Germany, KfW	Aménagement du BV de l’Oued Assif el Mal	4.6 (grant)	ANEF (2024)
10	Canada	Femmes résilientes au Moyen-Atlas (FERMA)	6.8 (CAD 10m)	Gouvernement du Canada (2024)
Sum			702.475	

Notes: (a) Amounts denominated in USD and Canadian dollars were converted to EUR using average annual exchange rates from the year in which the respective projects commenced, based on official exchange rate data. Exchange rates of 1 EUR = 1.0813 USD (2023) and 1 EUR = 1.48 CAD (2024), respectively. (European Central Bank 2025). The original amounts are displayed in brackets. (b) Budgetary figures may vary and do not necessarily reflect the actual amounts received by beneficiaries, as donors may allocate or disburse funds according to their institutional guidelines.

We show above that in the decade prior to the Forest Strategy’s launch, two foreign donors, the German government and the EU, implemented projects in Morocco aiming at influencing forest policy making. These projects allowed Moroccan state actors to collect information about the

priorities of foreign donors [8]. Additionally, GIZ specified a supra-sectoral project that supports Morocco's policy processes for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (GIZ 2024), aiming at directly influencing domestic policies and facilitating the inflow of foreign aid. Such policy projects focused enable domestic actors to acquire insights into the objectives of potential donors, and accordingly to formulate policies such as the Forest Strategy to facilitate further aid-financed projects. A factor that further facilitates collaboration is that, leading bureaucrats in the forest administration pursued their higher education in Europe and accomplished stages of their early careers in organisations such as the EU and UN bodies [8], consolidating their knowledge about potential donors' mechanisms and agendas and logically contributing to the achieved acquisition of projects. Additionally, on the policy level, the formulated 2030 Strategy caters to donors' objectives, as donors' project proposals and documentation refer to the Strategy, underlining that their specific project objectives correspond to Moroccan policies and their own foreign policy goals (EU 2022; GIZ 2023a; World Bank 2023b; EIB 2023; Gouvernement du Canada 2024; AFD 2025), as we will further unpack below (section "Donor's preferred sustainability goals").

On the operative level, we found evidence that the Moroccan forest administration took on a proactive management role despite the presence of strong foreign actors, which hold strong power resources, including information and funding. The administration's proactive management role consists of coordination efforts that span from the acquisition of funding to negotiating and monitoring the implementation of projects. To acquire funding for the Strategy's implementation, the forest administration actively approached potential foreign donors [9] and continuously seeks additional and new potential donors, for example, the Korean forest service (ANEF 2024b). Further, to facilitate coordination tasks, the forest administration created a department of international collaboration in 2023 [10]. This department takes on communication with donors and coordination of their projects [8, 9]. To oversee the implementation of the various projects, the department organises and hosts biannual "round table" meetings with all international and national actors [2, 8, 9, 15]. These "round table" meetings allow actors to share project advances, obstacles, and new ideas and are intended to avoid that efforts overlap [2]. Further, they serve as a forum to negotiate objectives and implementation [9], as a representative of a national park expressed:

« It's important to go to these meetings... the work of international organisations is not bad but sometimes their ideas do not make much sense in our context. » [15].

Given the number and different administrative and cultural backgrounds of the actors, differences of actors' specific objectives inevitably occur, for example, regarding implementation speed, as the personal communication of the state actors' representative shows.

« The [donor organisation] is rather quick when it comes to conducting studies for the project. But then, when it comes to implementation, they are much slower, and we try to push them. » [9]

The forest administration utilizes the “round table” meetings as a platform of exchange, influence, and open discussions on accountability, which is particularly important in cases of disagreements [9, 15]. An example of disagreement concerns, for instance, the objectives (specific activities to address gender inequalities) of one international project, as the state actor considered the set objectives inappropriate for the local context and was concerned about negative unintended consequences [9, 15]. Negotiating in the presence of additional actors may reinforce for the state forest administration, especially when facing strong power asymmetries, as presence of additional national and international actors is likely to improve the position of weaker domestic actors in a negotiation. This is especially the case if weaker actors present strong arguments, or, when imposing behaviour of stronger actors would be perceived as inappropriate, undermining national ownership. An additional point that reinforces the Moroccan forest administration's influence over implementation is that the donor projects implemented under the Strategy are mostly pilot projects, with a maximum time span of four years and bound to specific regions. In other words, the forest administration remains the only permanent and formally mandated actor that operates on a national scale.

Donors' preferred sustainability goals under the Strategy

As presented in Table 2, nine foreign donors finance and implement a total of ten projects under the Moroccan Forest Strategy. Our data shows that, on a formal level, donors align their projects with sustainability objectives, for example, specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the UN 2030 agenda, regional policies, international environmental agreements, and donor-specific institutional policies, for example, the “Blue Economy” (World Bank) and the European Green Deal (EU).

We found that foreign actors that explicitly mention the contribution of their projects to the achievement of SDG are linked to governments of industrialised countries, hence countries that promised to contribute to the UN 2030 agenda. Among these are, for example, the German

development agency GIZ and the multilateral donor EU. The GIZ project “Green Jobs II” explicitly mentions four SDGs (1,8,12,15) (GIZ 2023a), and the EU “Terre verte” project seven SDGs (2,3,5,8,12,13,15) (EU 2022). While the Canadian project FERMA does not explicitly refer to the SDGs, its principal focus on gender equality, environmental sustainability, and climate change adaptation (Gouvernement du Canada 2024) appears similar to the SDGs 5 – gender equality, 15 – life on land, and 13 – climate action.

Projects of the four development banks, namely African Development Bank (AfDB), the German Credit Institute for Reconstruction (KfW), European Investment Bank (EIB), and World Bank do not explicitly focus on SDG in their projects but tend to stress economic aspects within the frame of sustainable development, well aligned with their institutional objective to encourage economic growth and the Strategy goal “3. Invest and modernize the core of the forest profession”. The projects mention for example economic diversification (EIB 2023), enhanced private sector involvement (World Bank Group 2019), value chain development, and promotion of entrepreneurship (AfDB 2024). However, it is worth noting that the World Bank implements its projects within the framework of a country partnership with Morocco, established in 2019. This partnership addresses sixteen of the seventeen SDGs (World Bank Group 2019). The Forest Strategy’s two World Bank projects “Operation climate” and “Development program of the blue economy” specifically focus on Morocco’s achievement of its National Determined Contributions (NDC) in line with the Paris Agreement (World Bank 2023b) and, respectively, protection and valorisation of natural resources aligned with World Bank’s global initiative “Blue Economy” (World Bank 2023c).

Another regional strategic policy framework that directly relates to the 2030 Forest Strategy is the EU-Morocco Green Partnership (2021). Project documents of European donors, especially the EU, AFD, and the European Investment Bank, refer to it. These three actors operate in Morocco as “Team Europe” (European Commission 2023a). The Morocco-EU Green Partnership aims at a green transition with a strong focus on renewable energies and the enhancement of sustainability in multiple sectors, including agriculture, transport, and conservation (EU 2022). It is further closely connected to the “European Green Deal” and the EU “Farm to Fork” policy (ibid.). The statement below regarding the EIB’s project “Inclusive and durable forest management” shows how the Moroccan Forest Strategy, the EU project “*Terre Verte / Al Ard Al Khadraa*”, the Green Partnership, EU policies, and UN SDG seek formal alignment

“This 5-year operation (2024-2028) will support the “Forests of Morocco 2020-2030” strategy and [...] complements the European Union “Terre Verte / Al Ard Al Khadraa” [...] This support also falls within the scope of the Morocco-EU Green Partnership’s objectives. It is fully in line with national and European priorities, contributing directly to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).” (EU 2024a).

The formal alignment of these projects, partnerships, and policies represents a strong formal basis for the project activities. In sum, the variety of donors’ preferred sustainability goals under the Moroccan Forest Strategy spans from achieving SDGs, to supporting the economy, to the implementation of donors’ policies such as the World Bank’s worldwide blue economy program and the European Green Deal.

The rather broad nature of the Forest Strategy’s objectives offers donors a flexible platform to showcase contributions to global sustainability commitments, each referring to the strategy as a local policy in line with their institutional goals. Cited across donor literature (EU 2022; GIZ 2023a; World Bank 2023b; EIB 2023; Gouvernement du Canada 2024; AFD 2025), the Strategy serves hence as a formal justification to allocate funding, functioning as a venue for donor financed projects in the Moroccan forest sector.

Informal strategic interests beneath the narrative of Green Development

Since assessing all foreign actors’ informal interests would compromise the conciseness of this paper, this section focuses on the informal strategic interests of the group of donors that had a direct influence on forest policy formulation in Morocco. This group comprises the donors from the European region, namely the EU, EIB, AFD, GIZ, and KfW. These actors are either directly linked to the EU (EU and EIB) or the EU’s two hegemonic states, France (AFD) and Germany (GIZ, KfW). Under the Moroccan Forest Strategy, donors from this region provide a total of EUR 329.9 million, corresponding to 47 % of the foreign project budget. Further, as noted, the European donors collaborate as ‘team Europe’ in the Moroccan forest sector, seeking to formally align their interventions with EU foreign policies. Especially GIZ, EU, and AFD focus comparably strong on forest policy adaptation, as they dedicated projects to Moroccan forest policies.

Based on the broader review of grey literature, we identified two major strategic geopolitical interests of European actors: migration control and access to energy. Several findings support the high status of these interests on the donors’ agendas. In 2021, the EU renewed its partnership with

southern neighbours through the “new agenda for the Mediterranean” (EU 2021), an update to the Barcelona declaration (1995). Emphasising partnership and mutual interests, this new agenda spans five categories: democracy, economy, security, migration, and climate in ten countries of the southern Mediterranean (ibid.). The detailed commitments and priorities are agreed bilaterally between the EU and each respective partner country. While migration is listed alongside sustainability-oriented priorities, it in fact commands the largest share of the overall budget, as Dennaye (2023) notes in the specific case of Morocco. Of five programs, the EU designated the largest amount for “addressing irregular migration” (EUR 152 million), followed by projects on “social protection” (EUR 130 million) and “green transition” (EUR 115 million) (European Commission 2023b). The program “Green Transition” also includes the support of the Forest Strategy. Between 2021 and 2023, the EU allocated additional EUR 193 million to migration management to Morocco under the regional migration envelope (EU 2024b). Hence, the financial commitment for migration control is much higher than the fields of action environment and social welfare, reflecting the priority that migration management holds in the EU’s engagement with the region. Noteworthy, Morocco has used its role in migration management as a lever in negotiations with European partners, especially in times of political tension (Tittel-Mosser 2018; Ferrer-Gallardo and Gabrielli 2024).

Access to energy is the second major strategic interest of European donors we identified in Morocco, particularly in the context of Europe’s ongoing energy crisis and its aspired shift towards renewable energy sources. The *Long-Term Low-Carbon Strategy for Morocco* (2021) aims to cover 80% of the country’s energy demand with renewables by 2050 (UNOPS 2024). This ambition mirrors the European Green Deal (2019), which targets Europe becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (European Commission 2025). Energy cooperation between Morocco and the EU has evolved over time: in 2014, Morocco responded to the EU’s 2010 *Mediterranean Solar Plan* by launching its own *Moroccan Solar Plan* (GIZ 2014). The EU’s aim to collaborate with multiple Mediterranean countries gradually shifted towards more bilateral engagement with Morocco which emerged as a key partner, particularly in the field of green hydrogen. Following the EU’s 2020 *Hydrogen Strategy*, Morocco released its *Green Hydrogen Roadmap* in 2021 (Lebrouhi et al. 2024). This deepening cooperation culminated in the beforementioned 2022 *Morocco-EU Green Partnership*, a bilateral agreement on energy, climate,

and environment, described by the European Commission as a model for Euro-African collaboration (European Commission 2022).

“[The green partnership] is expected to become a model for similar partnerships on the African continent, where Morocco already leads in terms of environmental and climate ambitions.” (Patricolo 2022)

Beyond the EU framework, bilateral initiatives reinforced this trend: GIZ contributed to the policy formulation of the mentioned *national green hydrogen roadmap* (CEPS 2023; GIZ 2023) and the German development bank KfW provided a loan for the hydrogen production plant (KfW 2017). Such investments indicate the informal interest of the EU country in Morocco. The two rather self-centred interests, migration control, and access to energy contrast with the donor’s engagement in the Moroccan forest sector that follows sustainability statements centred around equity and inclusion.

In addition to the major strategic interests, migration and energy, we observed a third category of informal or strategic interest at the level of aid organisations. Bilateral agencies and in-country offices are also motivated by organisational survival and maintenance of status in the field. To achieve this, one European aid organisation has designed a department tasked with the alignment of project proposals to donor priorities, increasing the chances to secure funding in a competitive industry, as the below quote indicated:

We draft new project proposals based on information from our ongoing project activities. Then, we send the proposal to the [branch in the donor country] who knows the agenda of [ministry that allocates the budget] well. They add the necessary key words that correspond to the [ministry’s] current priorities. This increases the chances for the project proposal to be accepted. [2]

This shows how the organisation built a structure to connect knowledge from the grassroots level with knowledge about the donor’s agenda to achieve these exact points: organisational survival by maintaining field presence, securing future funding, and staff positions while surpassing competitors.

Policy narratives versus forest outcomes

In the context of the 2020-2030 Forest Strategy, coordination efforts and the mobilisation of substantial financial resources by both Moroccan authorities and international donors seem to

reflect a visible commitment to forest governance in Morocco. On the formal level, donor organisations, while pursuing broader regional interests and organisational mandates, integrated participatory and environment-focused approaches into their interventions. As noted throughout this article, official communications frequently cite evidence of progress, including the formulation and implementation of the Forest Strategy itself, and linked international collaborations. Repeated statements by Morocco’s forest director refer to a decline in reported forest offences since the launch of the 2030 Strategy (Medi1TV Afrique 2024; Jnina 2025).

Nevertheless, success on the level of policy design and acquisition of funding, as well as reduction of offenses, are not backed by tangible improvements in forest conditions at the national scale. According to data from Global Forest Watch, Tree Cover Loss (TCL) more than doubled after the release of the Forest Strategy, rising from 8.69 kilo hectares (kha) between 2015-2019 to 22.6 kha between 2020-2024 (Figure 2; GFW 2025).

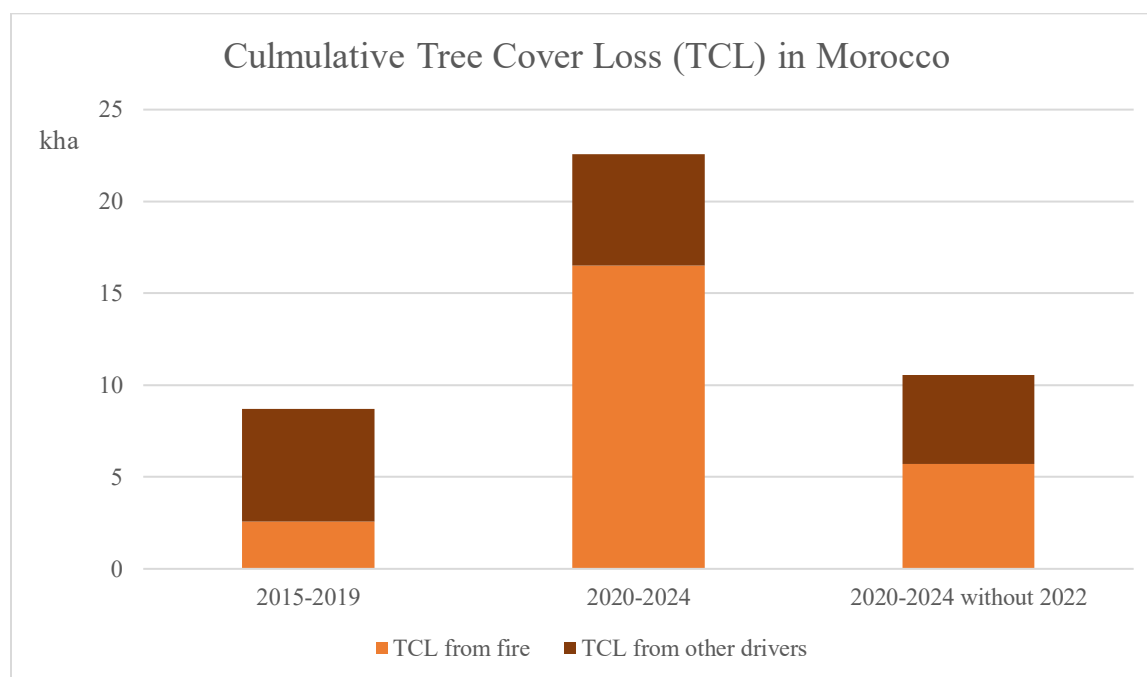


Figure 2. Culmulative Tree Cover Loss (TCL) in Morocco in kilo hectare, disaggregated by driver, five years before and after the release of the strategy “Forests of Morocco 2020-2030”. TCL is classified as either fire-related or caused by other drivers, such as permanent agriculture, logging, infrastructure expansion, hard commodity production, and other natural disturbances. The increase in loss after the release of the 2020-2030 Forest Strategy is evident, even when excluding the extreme fire year 2022. (Source: GFW 2025)

In 2022, severe forest fires caused a total of 10.8 kha of TCL, particularly affecting the region of Tanger-Tétouan (GFW 2025). While the 2022 fires may represent an exceptional climatic event, the trend of TCL remains stark: Even when excluding losses from 2022, the cumulative TCL of the remaining four years (2020, 2021, 2023, 2024), 10.57 kha, still surpasses the total loss, 8.69 kha, recorded in the previous 5 year period (2015-2019) (Figure 2). However, what about forest gains and reforestation efforts? GFW data only deliver data on forest gains until 2020, indicating that between 2015 and 2020, Morocco's tree cover gain corresponded to a total of 42.8 kha, of which 4.65 kha was within plantations. GFW does not consider information regarding the quality of newly growing forests, and values after 2020 – the launch of the Forest Strategy – are not available. Despite some forest gains in 2010-2020, a major research gap persists on forest-related land cover change in Morocco (Ben-Said et al. 2025). This gap is consolidated by the lack of a forest monitoring system and the absence of recent forest inventories. The Strategy aims to restore 600 kha of forests (EU 2024a); however, the availability of suitable plant material and water will influence the success and failure of such efforts. As mentioned earlier, Morocco is facing a severe water crisis, which is affecting vegetation and water reservoirs (NASA 2024). Recent projections indicate that the trend of severe droughts will further increase (Gumus et al. 2024). In other words, water, a resource necessary to reverse the trend of forest degradation and loss, is expected remain scarce.

In summary, despite the Forest Strategy's release and resource mobilisation, deforestation data indicate that Tree Cover Loss has even intensified since the start of its implementation, contradicting statements of successful environmental governance and forest protection. In parallel, the absence of a recent forest inventory and the lack of data on forest gain since 2020 emphasise that there is no reliable proof for the recovery of the forest cover. The increased deforestation and the lack of monitoring progress on the ground challenge claims of the positive impact of the Strategy on the forest cover in Morocco.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

H1 stated that the Forest Strategy functions as a formal gateway that allows foreign actors to showcase engagement towards their preferred sustainability goals and, in parallel, enables foreign actors to pursue their strategic interests at the national level in Morocco. The empirical evidence strongly supports this hypothesis: All ten international organisations, including the EU, World Bank, and GIZ, launched projects aligned with the respective donors' sustainability goals and with direct reference to the Strategy shortly after its launch. Donors' priorities included a variety of SDGs, the Moroccan administration's institutional reform with a focus on participation, economic competitiveness of the forest sector, which the rather broad objectives of the Strategy all accommodated. Through this alignment, especially European donors were able to use the Strategy to showcase harmonious cooperation, thereby advancing their own informal, strategic objectives in the region, such as securing access to renewable energy sources, especially through investments into green hydrogen production, and legitimizing expenditure for control of migration. Thus, in line with H1, the Forest Strategy indeed satisfied multiple interests of foreign donors: it provided a domestic reference for donor-driven sustainability agendas, while simultaneously enabling donors to maintain field presence and satisfy their informal interest under a narrative of sustainability.

H2 proposed that for the *makhzen*⁵ forest administration, the Forest Strategy functions as a tool to reinforce its position by 1- attracting foreign actors as collaboration partners and 2- a negotiation basis for internationally funded implementation efforts. Our findings support this hypothesis in several ways. Experience from forest policy-centred donor projects from the previous decade and personal experience of bureaucrats enabled the state forest administration to get acquainted with foreign donors' objectives and integrate them into the Strategy. This, combined with actively seeking donors, enabled the administration to find nine foreign donors for ten implementation projects. Simultaneously, we found evidence that the forest administration actively navigated international collaboration by coordinating a regular exchange of all actors involved in donor projects related to the Strategy. This way, the administration maintains a supervisory position, negotiating the alignment of foreign donor projects with its interests during the implementation phase, despite the presence of strong foreign actors (aid agencies). In sum, the data confirm that

the *makhzen* forest administration uses the Strategy to strengthen its own position via acquisition of funding and negotiation of implementation, which supports H2.

Our findings from the forest sector contrast with Olivié and Pérez (2016), whose cross-sectional analysis revealed a lack of coordination of international development in Morocco, as we found evidence that the forest administration took on a strong coordinator role under the Strategy, and especially European donors aimed at bundling and harmonising their interventions. The administration's proactivity and ability to coordinate multiple partnerships reminds of Cabestan's case study of Djibouti (2020), where the government enhanced its agency, despite its initially weaker position, by diversifying foreign allies and skilful negotiation of implementation modalities.

H3 stated that persisting sustainability issues are camouflaged by a symbolic success-narrative regarding the Forest Strategy, which is promoted by international actors and the forest administration. Since Morocco does not have a national forest monitoring system or a recent national forest inventory (Serbouti et al. 2023), we used satellite forest data to assess changes in Moroccan forest cover. While the used Global Forest Watch (GFW) data does not capture all dimensions of forest degradation or management and is not backed up by field sample plots, it is currently one of the only available datasets providing recent, spatially explicit tree cover change data for Morocco. GFW data shows that cumulative Tree Cover Loss (TCL) more than doubled in the five years after the launch of the Strategy, compared to the previous five years. Official statements centred around the successes of the Strategy, for instance, the administration's repeated statements regarding a decrease in forest offenses, do not refer to this crucial problem of increased deforestation, while donors refer to Morocco as a role model case. The created positive image of the policy's impact found in official documents and press releases, hence, contrasts with the deforestation data. Such a dynamic reflects indeed the symbolic trap described Edelman (1964) as we will further detail below (section "Symbolic traps in donor driven Green Development").

Deforestation, anthropogenic pressures, and participation

Noteworthy, deforestation in Morocco is strongly linked to anthropogenic pressure, rooted in the dependence of the rural population on forests for their subsidies. Formally suiting, the 2030 Forest Strategy places "reinventing and structuring the participatory approach" at the forefront of its objectives, well in line with Serbouti et al. (2023), who highlight that genuine engagement of

forest-adjacent communities is essential for addressing anthropogenic drivers of forest degradation.

However, Morocco's structural barriers undermine the Strategy's participatory rhetoric. **Firstly, 1-** under the forest administration, participation appears to be managed from above, with community mediators (Chaabi 2023) introducing state-defined roles and incentives rather than enabling communities to shape forest management on their own terms. In Morocco, such top-down dynamics follow a historical pattern. Past state interventions frequently resolved communities' resource conflicts through centrally decided reforestation, clarifying state ownership at the expense of all customary rights (Aubert 2014). Research describes the resulting relationship of distrust between rural populations and government administrations (Essatte 2018). Whether further top-down initiatives can change this is questionable. **Secondly, 2-** While under the Forest Strategy, compensation mechanisms for lost access to forests are planned (AfDB 2024), obstacles to independent evaluation and constructive criticism prevail in Morocco, as academic researchers, the press, and protesters face restrictions and risks⁷. This is documented by internationally acknowledged reports, noting that the press and scholars censor themselves (Freedom House 2025). This is in line with our field observations, as we noted that university professors avoid political topics despite conducting research on highly political themes such as conservation and land-use. Such an atmosphere limits research processes that study whether weaker actors perceive policy formulation and implementation as inclusive, fair, and effective. **Thirdly, 3-** lack of transparency, further limits informed public discourse. The limited transparency is exemplified by the noted lack of national forest data, the lack of an official document of the Forest Strategy (the most detailed publication of the strategy is a recorded speech with a PowerPoint Presentation), and a missing comprehensive public overview of the donor projects under it. In sum, the political context strongly limits meaningful participation in the policy process as 1- authority is centralised within the *makhzen* and top-down approaches dominate participation, 2- freedom of expression and academia are limited, and 3- forest data and the policy itself lack transparency.

⁷ Noteworthy, EU representatives rarely criticise Morocco's repressive politics publicly but did so for the first time in 25 years in early 2023 (Pitchers 2023).

Policy success versus issue resolution

Despite increased deforestation, on the administrative level, the formulated Forest Strategy goals are in line with pressing issues, have found formal approval, and are being funded by international donors and aid agencies as collaboration partners. Such administrative achievements fall under one of the seven success categories, named ‘program success’, as Andrews (2022b) defined. Our analysis reveals that donors and aid agencies have influenced Moroccan forest policies through targeted projects that shape policy formulations (section “Roots of the Strategy: influence of foreign donor priorities on Moroccan forest policy design”). We interpret this as evidence that in Moroccan forest governance, international actors embody the role of policy designers. Typically, policy designers set their focus for success on the mentioned category ‘program success’ (Andrews 2022a), which centres success on policy formulation and the administrative level. Notably, Andrew’s approach distinguishes ‘program success’ from success categories centred around the broader impact of policies. Andrews’s analysis shows that policy designers place less importance on further reaching impact of policies, like net impact on society, participation, and inclusivity (ibid.). Our study supports this argument, as donors (as characteristically for policy designers) focus on success on the administrative level (policy formulation, fund acquisition, international collaboration, and administrative reform) but disregard lacking impact on further reaching dimensions, for example, ‘net impact on society’, which may include sustainability issues, and in this vein, limits to participation and increased deforestation.

Our analysis hence sheds light on two causalities answering to the overarching research question, why donors portrait Morocco as role model case despite persisting sustainability issues: 1- emphasising the success of Moroccan environmental policies supports the satisfaction donors’ formal and informal interests at the Moroccan level and 2- as characteristic for policy designers, donors understand policy success as administrative achievements and do not focus the resolution of sustainability issues such as accelerating deforestation and obstacles to participation on the ground.

Symbolic traps in donor driven Green Development

In line with Edelman’s theory of symbolic politics (1964), our analysis indicates that an illusion of action to address the complex problem of forest degradation and deforestation in Morocco is created while root causes such as anthropogenic pressure, poverty, and the throughout impacts of

drought remain unresolved. In addition, our study appears to match all boxes that lead to a ‘symbolic trap’ consisting of ‘symbolic reassurance’, ‘persistence without tangible results regarding ongoing issues’, and ‘weak opposition’ (Edelman 1964; 1971): 1- ‘symbolic reassurance’ – in our study, the positive narrative around the Forest Strategy and donor driven pilot projects represents the symbolic reassurance that the issue is being addressed. 2- ‘persistence without tangible results regarding ongoing issues’ – we found that the same network of actors has collaborated for decades without achieving the resolution of the key issue of deforestation. However, they leverage resources and persist. Additionally, Edelman’s notion of ‘weak opposition’, the third part of the symbolic trap, also resonates with our case, as the noted obstacles to meaningful participation limit formal venues of criticism.

Our analysis identified informal strategic interests as the driving force in this dynamic. In the context of the 2030 Moroccan Forest Strategy, international donors – despite their stated commitment to inclusive green development – prioritise alignment with their own agendas, to showcase engagement in sustainability and harmonious partnership, while securing access to energy, maintenance of field presence, and enhanced migration control. In parallel, powerful actors’ self-presentation regarding policy and project success diverges from critical, evidence-based research (e.g. Faysse 2015; Benamar 2021). As also seen in the Green Morocco Plan, policies initially designed for participation and empowerment can, in practice, benefit intermediaries and reinforce existing inequalities (Perry et al. 2019; Montanari and Bergh 2019).

In sum, the lack of critical evaluation and persisting structural restrictions of civil liberties increase the risk that powerful actors employ environmental policies such as the 2030 Strategy and *participation* as another rhetoric tool to enhance their power and legitimacy, without tangible progress on the ground. In line with Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2017) and Reyniers (2022), our study represents an additional case in which foreign donors in conservation observably construct success stories, despite limited evidence of success. The divergences between narrative and outcomes lead to the conclusion that 1- for referring to policy success, donors tend to prioritise administrative achievements at the policy level, or the *aim to change* over the factual achievement of the change, 2- donors’ tendency to prioritise broader geopolitical and institutional agendas over the resolution of on-the-ground sustainability issues such as deforestation.

Further studies

This article offers an overview and analysis of the actors and interests converging in international collaboration under the “Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco”, five years after its release. Further project-specific empirical studies are necessary to assess the impacts and limitations of donor interventions on the grassroots level, site-specific, and national. In this context, our study briefly noted tensions between domestic and international actors in project implementation. Further analysing how such power struggles and disagreements between national and international actors impact goal setting, implementation of projects, and their impact on sustainability variables bears the potential to identify further barriers to addressing of sustainability issues. Additionally, investigating potential processes of scaling-up of donor-driven pilot projects is particularly relevant since leading actors in Morocco rely on this approach despite scientific critiques that question its long-term effectiveness (Aubert 2014). Finally, considering participation and deforestation, an additional research gap emerges, as it has not yet been studied, how the participation mechanisms that powerful actors introduced under the Strategy impact local deforestation and the wellbeing of forest adjacent communities.

CONCLUSIONS

To ensure their legitimacy and organisational survival, international donors rely on success stories of their initiatives and role model cases. Morocco represents such a role model case in environmental governance. This study is based on a theoretical framework combining actors’ formal and informal interests, agency, the forest political program, and the theory of symbolic politics. By studying international collaboration within the frame of one specific environmental policy, the Strategy 2020-2030 Forests of Morocco, our analysis shows that the Forest Strategy satisfies multiple formal interests and informal interests of leading international and domestic actors. For nine international actors, including donors and aid agencies, the Strategy represents a venue to showcase engagement toward their preferred sustainability goals. This represents the satisfaction of their most important formal interest and consolidates their legitimacy. Such legitimacy supports the pursuit of informal interests in the region, like access to renewable energy and migration control for the case of European donors. Simultaneously, the Strategy caters to the

informal interests of aid agencies to secure organisational survival. For the domestic actor, the Strategy represents a tool to improve its position as it attracted ten foreign donor projects, enabling financial inflow and diversification of allies. With a proactive management role, an increased number of partnerships, and a focus on pilot projects, the Strategy strengthened the forest administration's position in negotiations, enabling it to maintain a decisive role despite the presence of strong foreign actors with at times diverging interests.

The analysis shows that despite multiple administrative achievements, the successes of the Forest Strategy are so far centred on the policy level, while a selected sustainability issue, deforestation, has even accelerated on the ground. The Strategy's successes include the selection of locally relevant issues, the attraction of multiple foreign donors for implementation projects, and proactive coordination by the domestic forest administration. However, deforestation data shows that Tree Cover Loss (TCL) more than doubled in the first five years after the Strategy's launch in 2025, compared to the previous five years. The narratives of powerful actors regarding the Strategy's impact focuses on success and overlooks this issue. Furthermore, participation, although central to the Strategy's rhetoric, faces significant structural limitations in Morocco, thereby undermining civic and academic freedoms. These divergences between narrative and outcomes indicate 1- donors' understanding of success focuses on policy progress or the *displayed aim to change* rather than the factual resolution of sustainability issues such as deforestation and structural barriers to meaningful participation, 2- donors' tendency to prioritise broader geopolitical and institutional agendas over the recipient country's sustainability issues.

Such dynamics illustrate a convergence of interests: donors benefit from showcasing Morocco as a climate leader as it enables them to pursue regional strategic interests, while in parallel, the Moroccan state leverages this success narrative for strategic gain. Yet this convergence risks perpetuating a cycle of symbolic success while failing to address ongoing environmental degradation and social inequalities. The Moroccan case thus exemplifies the need to look beyond celebratory narratives and scrutinise the interplay of actors' informal interests and implementation of environmental policies.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors confirm there are no conflicts of interest.

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APPENDIX

Table I. Types of grey literature and online sources.

Grey literature	n
Legal text	2
State reports	5
Meeting materials	2
Project literature	46
Online published news-paper articles/press releases	15
Videos	2
Total	72

Table II. Sources of empirical data, interviews, and observations.

Source	Organisation	Actor's focus	Location	Date
[1]	International organisation 1	Development	Middle Atlas	16/06/2023
[2]	International organisation 1	Development	Rabat	27/06/2023
[3]	Forest organisation 1	Development	High Atlas	29/05/2023
[4]	Forest organisation 1	Development	Online	19/06/2023
[5]	Forest organisation 2	Development	Middle Atlas	06/06/2023
[6]	Forest organisation 2	Development	Middle Atlas	15/06/2023
[7]	State actor	Administration	Middle Atlas	15/06/2023
[8]	State actor	Administration	Rabat	12/07/2024
[9]	State actor	Administration	Rabat	16/07/2024
[10]	State actor	Administration	Online	10/10/2024
[11]	Smallholders' association 1	NTPF	Middle Atlas	10/06/2023
[12]	Smallholders' association 2	Pasture	Middle Atlas	07/06/2024
[13]	Smallholders' association 3	Pasture	Middle Atlas	07/06/2024
[14]	Smallholders' association 4	Pasture	Middle Atlas	07/06/2024
[15]	National Park 1	Conservation	Middle Atlas	12/06/2023
[16]	National Park 1	Conservation	Rabat	23/06/2023
[17]	National Park 2	Conservation	Middle/high Atlas	06/06/2024
[18]	Research organisation 1	Research	Middle Atlas	05/06/2023
[19]	Research organisation 2	Research	Salé	22/06/2023
[20]	Research organisation 3	Research	Kenitra	23/06/2024
[21]	International organisation 2	Development	Rabat	20/06/2023
[22]	International organisation 2	Development	Rabat	24/06/2024
[23]	International organisation 3	Conservation	Rabat	17/05/2024

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