



URBANISATION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND IN MOROCCO: CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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KEY MESSAGES



Urbanisation Pressure:

Rapid urbanisation in Morocco, particularly in peri-urban areas, is exerting increasing pressure on agricultural land. This trend is driven by population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and economic development. Fertile lands, essential for food security and maintaining rural livelihoods, are increasingly being converted into residential, commercial, and industrial areas. For example, according to a World Bank study (2023), Morocco's urbanisation rate has increased by 2.5% per year over the past two decades, threatening the availability of agricultural land.



Policy Gaps:

Morocco's current land governance policies fail to balance the competing needs of urban development and agricultural land preservation. Existing regulations lack rigorous enforcement mechanisms, leading to unauthorised land conversions and speculative land markets. For instance, a recent Hassan II Agronomic and Veterinary Institute (2022) study highlights that 30% of agricultural land near major cities is illegally converted into construction land.



Need for Targeted Interventions:

Policymakers must adopt and enforce stricter land use regulations that prioritise agricultural land preservation. Targeted interventions, such as economic incentives for farmers and urban planning reforms, are essential to protect Morocco's agricultural heritage while accommodating necessary urban growth. Examples of such interventions can be seen in countries like France, where strict agricultural zoning policies have been implemented to limit urban sprawl (FAO, 2021).



I am Chaimaa Erreddaf, an urban planner specialising in land governance. I am currently pursuing a PhD at IAV Hassan II, focusing on the relationship between urbanisation and agricultural land preservation. I hold a Master's degree in Geospatial Sciences and Land Governance from the NELGA program, where I also serve as a research assistant for NELGA North Africa. In addition to my academic work, I host the series "Land Talks with Chaimaa" on LinkedIn. I am involved in founding the Moroccan Association of Researchers in Geomatics and Land Governance, an alumni association of the NELGA program.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

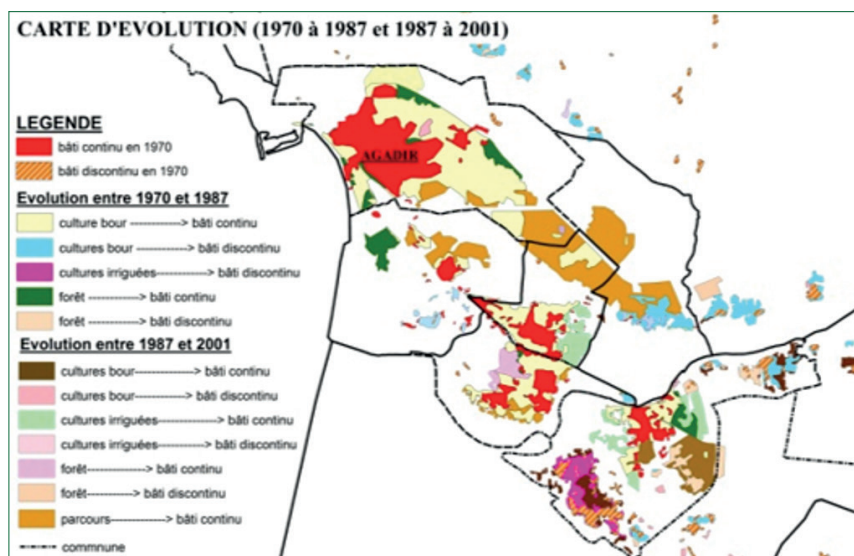
Urbanisation in Morocco has become a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a driver of economic growth, modernisation, and improved infrastructure; on the other, it presents significant challenges, particularly regarding land governance and agricultural land preservation.

The rapid expansion of urban areas, especially in peri-urban regions, is increasingly encroaching on fertile agricultural lands, vital for the country's food security and rural economy. This trend is compounded by population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and the demand for housing and commercial developments.

However, Morocco's current land governance frameworks have struggled to keep pace with this rapid urbanisation. The absence of robust land use planning and the weak enforcement of existing regulations has led to unregulated urban sprawl, often at the expense of productive agricultural land. The challenge is further complicated by the economic pressures on farmers to sell their land, driven by lucrative developer offers and insufficient incentives to maintain agricultural production.

This policy brief seeks to address these pressing issues by exploring the gaps in existing land governance policies, assessing the impact of urbanisation on agricultural land, and proposing targeted interventions. By examining both the challenges and opportunities presented by urban growth, this brief aims to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers to ensure a balanced approach to development that supports urban expansion while safeguarding Morocco's valuable agricultural resources.

Population growth, rural-urban migration, and economic development. Existing policies and regulatory frameworks have yet to keep pace with this rapid change, leading to the unchecked expansion of urban areas at the expense of agricultural land. This has significant implications for food security, environmental sustainability, and rural communities dependent on agriculture.



Map 1: Evolution Map (1970-2001)

Source CRTS, 2001

Methodology

A rigorous methodological approach was employed to develop this policy brief, combining an in-depth review of literature, analysing policy documents, and examining specific case studies on land governance in Morocco.

Documents Analyzed:

World Bank Report on Agricultural Land Preservation in Morocco (2023):

This report comprehensively analyses current urbanisation trends and their impacts on agricultural land in Morocco. It highlights the challenges of uncontrolled urban expansion and offers recommendations for strengthening land governance.

Annual Report of the Ministry of Agriculture on Urbanization Trends (2022):

This report presents recent statistics on the conversion rate of agricultural land into urban areas and assesses the effectiveness of current policies in preserving agricultural land.

Academic Studies on the Impact of Urban Expansion on Agricultural Land:

Various studies published in scientific journals, such as those from the Hassan II Agronomic and Veterinary Institute, were reviewed to understand the underlying dynamics of agricultural land loss and to identify gaps in current land management practices.

Stakeholder Consultations

To gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the situation, consultations were conducted with several key stakeholders, including:



Ministry of Agriculture: Representatives from this ministry provided crucial insights into existing policies, the challenges of their implementation, and ongoing initiatives to strengthen the preservation of agricultural land in the face of urbanization.



Urban Planners: Experts in urban planning, particularly those working within urban planning agencies, were consulted to understand the constraints faced in planning and regulating urban expansion in agricultural areas.



Local Government Officials: Local officials shared their perspectives on the impact of urbanisation on rural communities and the challenges associated with managing urban growth in peri-urban areas.



Findings

The data analysis revealed several key trends regarding the impact of urbanisation on agricultural land in Morocco.

Significant Reduction in Agricultural Land: Between 1970 and 2021, Morocco lost about 30% of its agricultural land due to urban expansion, particularly in the regions of Casablanca-Settat, Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, and Fès-Meknès. This reduction has been particularly pronounced in peri-urban areas, where the conversion of agricultural land to buildable land has been the fastest. According to a World Bank report (2023), this loss is accompanied by decreased local agricultural production, compromising food security in these regions.

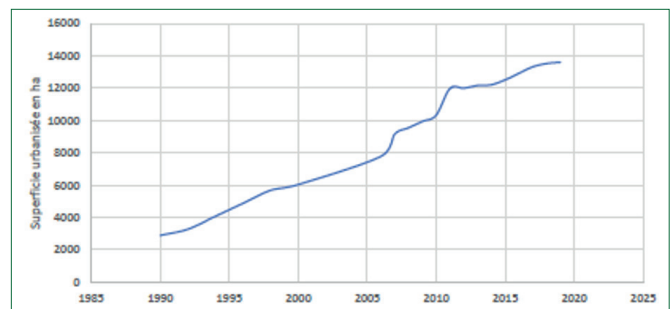
Economic Impact on Rural Communities: Urban expansion has led to significant economic changes for rural communities. Farmers often find themselves compelled to sell their land to real estate developers due to increasing economic pressures, including rising production costs and a lack of government support. A study by the National Institute of Statistics and Applied Economics (INSEA, 2022) showed that 40% of farmers in peri-urban areas sold all or part of their land over the past two decades.

Weaknesses in Regulatory Frameworks: The survey of land governance policies revealed that current regulatory frameworks need more effective mechanisms to protect agricultural land. Existing

laws often need to be better enforced, allowing illegal agricultural land conversions to urban zones. For example, an analysis of regulations by the High Commissioner for Planning (2021) shows that more than 60% of agricultural land conversions to buildable areas in the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region occurred without adequate legal authorisation.

Insufficient Conservation Efforts: Conservation initiatives, while present, need to be more sufficient to curb the loss of agricultural land. Support programs for farmers, such as crop subsidies and land conservation incentives, still need to offset the economic benefits of selling land for urban development. A report from the Ministry of Agriculture (2022) highlights that only 15% of farmers benefited from the proposed land conservation subsidy programs over the past five years.

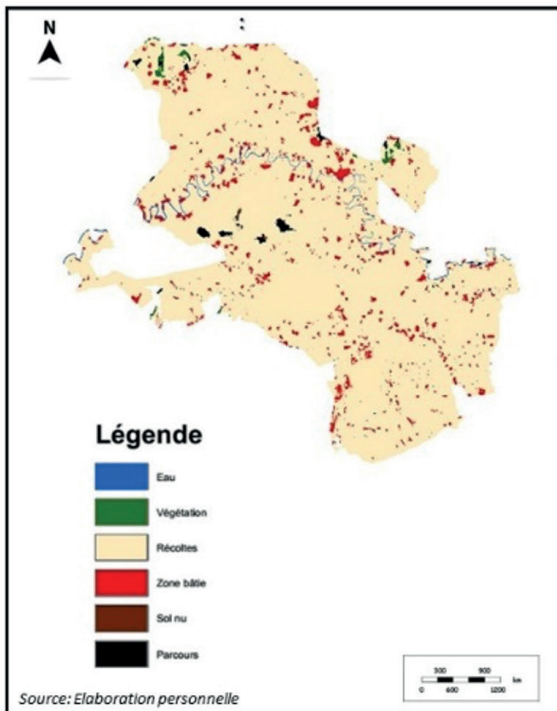
Diagram 1: Forecast of Increase in Urbanized Area (in hectares) in the PIG



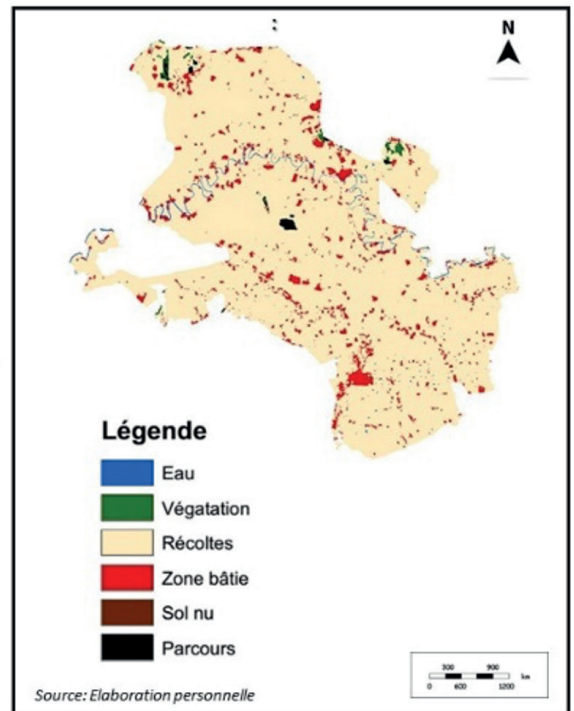
Source: Domees NOVEC

Map 2: Extraction of Built-Up Areas between 2017 and 2021.

Carte d'occupation du sol du PIG en 2017



Carte d'occupation du sol du PIG en 2021



After researching the area in terms of the urbanization of irrigated lands within the Gharb irrigation perimeter, it was observed that the urbanized areas were 7,791 hectares in 2006 and 13,607 hectares in 2019.

Recommendations



Addressing the Reduction in Agricultural Land:

Recommendation: Implement stricter land use regulations to prevent the conversion of agricultural land into urban areas. Strengthen enforcement mechanisms to ensure adherence to these regulations.



Supporting Rural Communities Economically:

Recommendation: Provide financial incentives and support programs to help farmers retain their land and continue agricultural activities. This could include subsidies for sustainable farming practices and access to low-interest loans.¹



Improving Regulatory Frameworks:

Recommendation: Revise and update land conversion regulations to close loopholes that allow illegal conversions. Increase transparency and public awareness regarding land use policies.²



Enhancing Conservation Efforts:

Recommendation: Expand and improve conservation programs to provide better support to farmers. Increase funding for conservation initiatives and ensure that more farmers are aware of and can access these programs.³

Action Plan

An action plan for implementing the recommendations could involve:



Timeline:

A phased approach to implementing land use reforms over the next five years.



Stakeholders:

Collaboration with local governments, farmers' associations, urban planners, and NGOs.



Resources:

Allocating financial and technical resources to support land use monitoring and enforcement.



Monitoring and Evaluation:

Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to track the effectiveness of policy interventions and make necessary adjustment.

1 Institut National de Statistique et d'Économie Appliquée (INSEA). (2022). *Economic Impacts of Urbanization on Rural Communities in Morocco*.

2 Haut-Commissariat au Plan. (2021). *Analysis of Land Conversion Regulations in Rabat-Salé-Kénitra*.

3 Ministry of Agriculture. (2022). *Agricultural Land Conservation Programs in Morocco: Challenges and Outcomes*.



CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Based on the analysis, it is evident that urbanisation has led to a significant reduction in agricultural land in Morocco, with a loss of approximately 30% from 1970 to 2021, mainly affecting peri-urban areas in key regions such as Casablanca-Settat, Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, and Fès-Meknès. This trend has compromised local food security and adversely impacted rural communities, forcing many farmers to sell their land due to economic pressures.

The current regulatory frameworks are inadequate for protecting agricultural land, as enforcement is often weak, leading to illegal conversions. Additionally, conservation efforts have proven insufficient, with many farmers not benefiting from available support programs. Moving forward, it is crucial to strengthen land use regulations by revising and enforcing stricter laws and improving monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Supporting rural communities through financial incentives, training, and resources is essential to help farmers retain their land and improve productivity. Expanding and enhancing conservation programs and raising awareness about their benefits will be vital for protecting the remaining agricultural land. Promoting sustainable urban development by integrating agricultural land preservation into urban planning and encouraging green infrastructure can mitigate the pressures of urban expansion.

Furthermore, establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the effectiveness of these measures and adjusting strategies as needed will ensure a comprehensive approach to balancing urban growth with agricultural protection.



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