

## Collective Land Mobilization in Morocco: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Investment Dynamics in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra Region.

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**Abstract:**

This study examines the mobilization of collective lands (*Soulaliyates*) in Morocco within the context of the "Generation Green 2020-2030" strategy. Drawing on Heller's (1998) "Anti-Commons" theoretical framework, the research investigates whether the state-led leasing mechanism addresses the structural paralysis historically linked to indivision and fragmented property rights. Employing a mixed-methods approach in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region, the study integrates quantitative analysis of 32 agricultural investment projects with qualitative semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders. Findings indicate a clear distinction between legal land mobilization and actual economic valorization. Although the leasing mechanism separates ownership from usage and circumvents traditional tribal vetoes, it does not ensure project success: only 44% of the projects achieved effective development, while 56% remain stalled or have been terminated. The analysis reveals an evolution of the "Anti-Commons" effect, as initial community blockages give way to "entrepreneurial" inertia resulting from adverse selection and procedural bottlenecks. The article concludes that while long-term leases are necessary for agrarian transition, they are insufficient without comprehensive reform of territorial governance and investor selection processes.

**Keywords:** Collective Lands, Anti-Commons, Agricultural Investment, Generation Green 2020-2030.

## 1. Introduction

Morocco's land system is shaped by a layered and complex legal history that has developed over centuries. At its core are collective lands — known as *Soulaliyates* — which cover nearly 15 million hectares and make up a significant part of the country's territory. The Ministry of the Interior oversees these lands, and they hold a protected legal status: they cannot be sold, seized, or claimed through long-term occupation. While this protection was meant to safeguard communal rights, it has also, paradoxically, made it very difficult to put these lands to productive use. Despite their real agricultural and economic potential, the collective lands have largely been excluded from Morocco's modernization efforts, held back by deep-rooted structural constraints (Bencheikroun, 2018).

In response to this long-standing stagnation, Morocco made a significant policy move with the "Generation Green 2020-2030" strategy. The plan sets an ambitious target: to open up one million hectares of collective lands for agricultural investment, mainly through long-term leasing agreements. But this is more than a technical fix — it raises a deeper question about how shared resources are governed: can introducing market-based contracts actually resolve the structural blockages that come with communally owned land?

To make sense of this challenge, this study draws on the concept of the Anti-Commons, developed by Michael Heller (1998). Most people are familiar with the "tragedy of the commons" — the idea that when no one owns a resource, everyone overuses it. The Anti-Commons flips this: here, too many people hold veto power over a resource, resulting in paralysis rather than overuse. In the Moroccan context, this plays out clearly — getting anything done on collective land requires consensus among many rights holders, all while navigating heavy administrative oversight. The outcome is a fragmented decision-making process that effectively freezes any economic initiative. With this in mind, the article sets out to examine what leasing has actually achieved in practice. The core argument is that by separating ownership—which remains with the community—from usage rights—which are handed to investors—leasing could, in theory, work around the Anti-Commons deadlock. Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is twofold: first, to empirically assess the concrete impact of the land mobilization program on the ground in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region; and second, to determine whether this leasing mechanism genuinely breaks the cycle of institutional inertia or merely shifts the structural blockages elsewhere.

To achieve these objectives, the remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, tracing the conceptual shift from the classical Tragedy of the Commons to the paralysis of the Anti-Commons, specifically within the Moroccan land governance context. Section 3 details the mixed-methods methodology, which combines quantitative data from 32

agricultural investment projects with qualitative stakeholder interviews. Section 4 presents the empirical results, highlighting the persistent gap between legal land mobilization and effective economic valorization. Section 5 discusses these findings, analyzing the evolution from tribal resistance to new entrepreneurial bottlenecks. Finally, Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations for more integrated territorial governance.

## **2. Literature review**

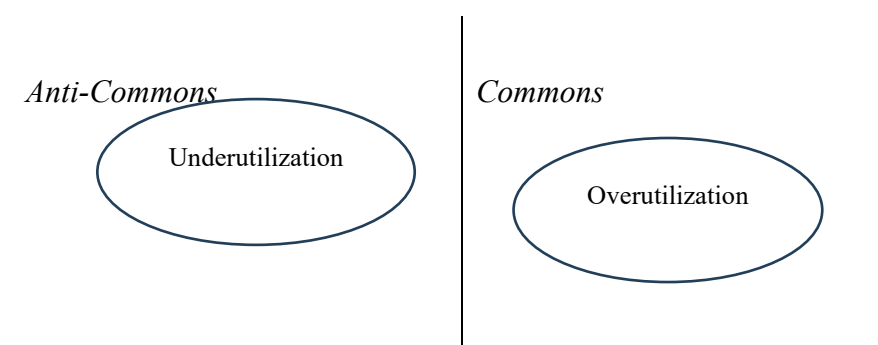
To understand how collective land is mobilized in Morocco, we need to draw on two complementary theoretical frameworks: the classical theory of the commons and the more recent concept of the Anti-Commons. This is what sits at the heart of this study. Together, they help us trace a key conceptual shift: from the overexploitation of shared resources to their underutilization.

### **2.1. From the Tragedy of the Commons to the Paralysis of the Anti-Commons**

The study of shared resource management is largely built on Garrett Hardin's influential article "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968). Hardin argues that when a finite resource is freely and openly accessible, its degradation becomes inevitable. The reasoning is rooted in individual rationality: each actor seeks to maximize personal gain from a shared resource — such as a common pasture — while the costs of overuse are distributed across the group. This lack of exclusion rights produces significant negative externalities, which have historically been used to justify state intervention or privatization as corrective mechanisms. Elinor Ostrom (1990) offered an important counterpoint, demonstrating that communities can govern shared resources through cooperative arrangements, though such approaches tend to encounter growing coordination difficulties as scale increases.

Michael Heller (1998) identified a kind of mirror-image problem: the "Tragedy of the Anti-Commons." Where the classic Commons suffer from too little control over a resource, the Anti-Commons arise from too much — specifically, when exclusion rights become so fragmented that no one can act. As seen in post-Soviet transitions, when too many actors each hold a veto, decisions stall, and resources go unused. Buchanan and Yoon (2000) confirmed this symmetry: underutilization is just as economically harmful as overexploitation. The takeaway is that neither extreme works — what matters is finding the right balance between who can use a resource and who can block others from doing so.

**Figure 1 : Illustration de la symétrie entre les Commons et les Anti-Commons**



**Source : Buchanan, J., & Yoon, Y. J. (2000). *Symmetric tragedies: Commons and anti-commons*. *Journal of Law and Economics*.**

### **2.2. The Persistence of Anti-Commons in Moroccan Land Governance**

The Anti-Commons theory proves especially useful for understanding the situation of collective lands in Morocco. Historically, tribal land structures have been shaped by overlapping rights and complex decision-making processes involving multiple actors — assemblies of delegates (Nouabs), the Ministry of the Interior acting as guardian, and local authorities. This layered institutional architecture creates numerous potential points of blockage, turning land capital into an underused or poorly optimized resource.

The national strategy “Generation Green 2020-2030” seeks to break this deadlock by using leasing as a key lever to mobilize one million hectares for agricultural investment. The underlying logic is to separate ownership — which remains collective — from usage rights, which are transferred to the investor, thereby circumventing the constraints of joint ownership. Yet as this analysis shows, the risk of Anti-Commons does not simply go away; it takes on a new form.

Two types of blockage continue to emerge from the data:

1. Procedural Inertia: The need to obtain approval from multiple administrative and community bodies creates bottlenecks that delay the effective use and development of the land.
2. Adverse Selection (New Anti-Commons): Bidding criteria centered on projected profitability tend to favor financially attractive offers, often put forward by investors who lack the experience or genuine commitment to follow through.

Paradoxically, the reform risks replacing one form of blockage with another: instead of tribal inertia, the obstacle becomes entrepreneurial failure. Lands may be legally leased and thus removed from community use, yet still sit idle due to tenant underperformance. Ultimately, the success of land mobilization hinges not just on freeing up land through legal reform, but on the

state's ability to streamline governance and carefully select capable actors. — otherwise, the tragedy of the Anti-Commons simply emerges in a contractual guise.

To put the Moroccan reform in perspective, it is worth looking at comparable agrarian transitions elsewhere — most notably the reform of Mexico's *ejidos* (Deininger, 2001). Much like the collective land, the *ejidos* underwent extensive legal restructuring to stimulate agricultural investment through tenure regularization. Yet the Mexican experience makes one thing clear: reforming legal status alone is not enough without a parallel overhaul of governance structures. Research consistently shows that changing land tenure without addressing broader institutional support rarely delivers the expected productivity gains. This comparative perspective sharpens the central question of this study: Does the Moroccan leasing model genuinely neutralize the forces of inertia, or does it simply shift the blockages elsewhere?

### 3. Methods

This study is anchored in a pragmatist epistemological paradigm, which is uniquely suited for mixed-methods research in institutional economics. Pragmatism transcends the traditional divide between positivism and interpretivism by prioritizing the practical implications of the research question over methodological purism. In the context of Moroccan land governance, this paradigm allows for the integration of objective, quantifiable metrics (such as investment volumes and mobilization rates) with the subjective, socially constructed realities of the actors involved (such as community mistrust and institutional friction).

To navigate the relationship between Heller's (1998) theoretical framework and our empirical findings, the study adopts an abductive mode of reasoning. Rather than strictly deducing hypotheses to be confirmed, or purely inducing new theory from field observations, abduction involves a continuous, iterative dialogue between theory and data. The research began with the deductive premise that state-led leasing mechanisms should conceptually resolve the Anti-Commons deadlock. However, upon confronting the surprising empirical reality of a 56% failure rate, we engaged in abductive reasoning to reinterpret the data, ultimately identifying a new generative mechanism: the mutation of the Anti-Commons effect from tribal resistance to entrepreneurial and administrative inertia. This methodological approach justifies the necessity of the subsequent mixed-methods design.

Following this epistemological stance, the operational research design draws on a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative investigation. This choice is driven by the need to go beyond a purely legal reading and engage with the operational realities on the ground. The quantitative dimension helps measure the scale of the phenomenon — success rates, investment

volumes — while the qualitative component is essential for unpacking the socio-institutional dynamics and actor behaviors, such as blockages and mistrust, that numbers alone cannot capture.

### **3.1. The Documentary and Quantitative Investigation**

The study begins with a thorough documentary analysis, including a close reading of recent legal texts — most notably Law 62-17 on administrative guardianship — to map the regulatory environment.

On the empirical side, the analysis is grounded in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region, which serves as a pilot territory for the "Generation Green 2020-2030" strategy. The sample consists of 32 carefully selected agricultural investment projects, representing 50% of all lease contracts established in the region. The quantitative phase involves collecting and analyzing a set of precise performance indicators:

- The mobilized area (in hectares);
- The financial volume of committed investments.
- The effective project realization rate.
- The territorial distribution and scores obtained under official selection grids (job creation, royalties, etc.).

To go beyond descriptive statistics and strengthen the quantitative assessment, the data from the 32 projects were subjected to further statistical analysis. A correlation matrix was first generated to explore preliminary relationships between financial investment volume, lease duration, and total land area mobilized. A logistic regression model was then developed to identify the drivers of effective economic valorization, testing the probability of project completion against these continuous variables and categorical spatial data broken down by province. Together, these tools allow for a more rigorous examination of whether contractual security alone is sufficient to determine entrepreneurial success.

### **3.2. The Qualitative Approach**

Alongside the quantitative research, a qualitative survey was carried out using semi-structured interviews. This phase involved key stakeholders in the process: members of provincial commissions, community delegates (*Nouabs*), and project holders. The aim was to understand how these actors view the obstacles they face and to identify the root causes of project failures.

## **4. Results**

Examining the rollout of the "Generation Green 2020-2030" strategy in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region reveals a clear gap between the legal mobilization of land and its actual economic valorization. The empirical findings point to a partial reduction in Anti-Commons effects, offset by the emergence of new operational bottlenecks.

**Table 1: Data regarding the 32 collective land parcels mobilized for agricultural investment, Béni Mellal-Khénifra Region (2025)**

	Lease Agreement	Land Area (ha)	Net Investment (Millions MAD)	Lease Duration (Average/years)	Implemented Projects %
<b>Béni Mellal</b>	8	622	86,64	40	25%
<b>Azilal</b>	7	132	13,98	6	0%
<b>Khouribga</b>	6	121	7,26	40	50%
<b>Fkih Ben Salah</b>	11	290	6,27	7	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>1165</b>	<b>114,15</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>44%</b>

*Source : Auteur*

#### 4.1. Quantitative Assessment: A Mixed Land Mobilization Outcome

At the regional level, the program facilitated the leasing of 2,792 hectares through competitive calls for projects, with lease terms ranging from 6 to 40 years, designed to provide security for agricultural investment. Looking more closely at the sample of 32 plots — totaling 1,165 hectares out of 63 regional plots — the committed investment volume reaches. Yet when looking at actual implementation rates, the picture becomes more mixed. Only 44% of sampled projects have led to effective development, meaning that 56% are either stalled or heading toward termination. A closer territorial breakdown, shown in Table 1, reveals striking disparities: the Fkih Ben Salah zone achieves a 100% completion rate. At the same time, the province of Azilal records zero despite 132 hectares being mobilized. This points to a key finding: contractual security alone is not enough to guarantee entrepreneurial success.

**Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Project Variables**

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
<b>1</b>	Area Mobilized (ha)	36.44	33.57	-		
<b>2</b>	Guarantee Deposit (Millions MAD)	0.18	0.23	.71 ( $p < .001$ )	-	
<b>3</b>	Lease Duration (Years)	21.16	16.89	.48 ( $p < .01$ )	.44 ( $p < .05$ )	-

*Source : Auteur*

The correlation matrix revealed strong positive associations between mobilized area and the required financial guarantee ( $r = .71, p < .001$ ), as well as between area and lease duration ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ). Notably, however, the subsequent logistic regression shows that these structural and financial variables do not, on their own, translate into operational success.

**Table 3: Logistic Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Effective Project Implementation**

Predictor	B	SE	z	p	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	1.17	0.68	1.73	.083	3.24	[0.86, 12.21]
Area Mobilized (ha)	-0.01	0.02	-0.36	.719	0.99	[0.96, 1.03]
Guarantee Deposit (MAD)	-1.29	2.36	-0.55	.584	0.27	[0.00, 28.21]
Lease Duration (Years)	-0.03	0.03	-1.33	.182	0.97	[0.92, 1.02]

**Source : Auteur**

Note:  $N = 32$ ; CI = confidence interval; The dependent variable is Project Status (0 = Stalled/Terminated, 1 = Implemented).

The logistic regression model reveals a striking finding: the traditional contractual and financial levers — land size ( $p = .719$ ), financial deposit amount ( $p = .584$ ), and lease duration ( $p = .182$ ) are not significant predictors of whether a project will actually be implemented. This statistical insignificance supports the hypothesis that securing land rights and requiring substantial financial commitments, while necessary, are not enough on their own to overcome the operational inertia of the Anti-Commons.

#### 4.2. Leasing as an Institutional Lever Against Indivision

From a qualitative standpoint, the leasing mechanism has proven effective in addressing the structural bottlenecks associated with collective ownership. By routing decisions through call-for-project procedures validated by assemblies of delegates (*Nouabs*) and overseen by the Directorate of Rural Affairs, the mechanism has brought greater rationality to the decision-making process. Prior land registration and the clarification of rights have helped reduce the internal conflicts that typically come with joint ownership, turning dormant land capital into a source of revenue through royalties.

### 4.3. The Resurgence of Anti-Commons Logics

Despite these institutional advances, the logic of the Anti-Commons has not disappeared — it has simply taken on new forms. Field surveys point to three main factors behind the 56% failure rate:

1. **Exogenous Factors:** Harsh climatic conditions, particularly drought, have taken a serious toll on project viability. As one investor in the Khouribga province put it: “The lease gave us the legal right to the land, but the water stress made the initial business plan completely obsolete within the first year. The capital is locked into a project that cannot physically grow.”
2. **Social Factors:** Resistance from certain rights holders continues to surface during the physical implementation of projects. These blockages are often driven by local political rivalries or bad faith and can seriously impede the execution of leases. A representative of the Nouabs captured this tension well: "Even with the official signatures and the administrative approvals, if the local families feel the selection process was opaque or that the financial royalties do not compensate for the loss of grazing access, they will find informal ways to stall the equipment installation."
3. **Administrative & Entrepreneurial Bottlenecks:** The selection process itself is a source of friction. A provincial commission official noted: “We often see candidates who win the bid based on highly attractive financial royalty projections. However, once the contract is signed, they lack the technical expertise or banking support to actually break ground, leaving the land legally secured but economically dead.”

The quantitative data confirms just how paralyzing residual social vetoes can be. A cross-tabulation of project status against community opposition reveals a case of perfect statistical separation: all 8 projects facing local opposition — 100% — failed to reach the implementation phase, making lease duration and financial guarantees entirely beside the point. This finding makes clear that while the state has formally centralized the legal “right of exclusion” through leasing, communities retain a powerful informal veto on the ground — triggering precisely the kind of paralysis Heller (1998) described.

### 5. Discussion

The findings from the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region prompt a reassessment of both the theoretical and practical value of leasing as a response to the "tragedy of the Anti-Commons." The literature, particularly Heller (1998) and Buchanan & Yoon (2000), holds that the fragmentation of veto rights leads to resource underutilization, and Morocco's leasing mechanism is, in essence, an attempt to address this inefficiency by reconfiguring usage rights. This discussion unfolds along

three main lines: the restructuring of property rights, the persistence of new forms of blockage, and the need for integrated territorial governance.

### **5.1. The Rationalization of Rights: A Partial Response to Indivision**

Leasing represents a significant institutional innovation in Moroccan collective land tenure. By granting an investor an exclusive secure right of use through a long-term lease of up to 40 years, the state can, in theory, neutralize the multiple veto rights that typically characterize community management. The mechanism serves as a tool for legal simplification: it preserves the collective title to the land — and with it, the community's sense of identity — while bringing the resource into market logic. This hybrid approach effectively sidesteps the burdens of joint ownership, turning dormant heritage into productive capital and generating financial returns, in the form of royalties, for rights holders.

### **5.2. The Resurgence of Anti-Commons: From Tribal Blockage to Entrepreneurial Blockage**

Yet the empirical analysis uncovers a troubling paradox. While leasing removes the initial legal barriers, it does not automatically guarantee the land's economic use. A project realization rate of just 44% in the studied sample suggests that the leasing mechanism can itself give rise to a new form of Anti-Commons — one that no longer stems from community opposition, but from the failure of selection and support mechanisms. The project evaluation grid heavily favors the financial offer (royalties scored out of 40 points) at the expense of technical soundness or investor experience (5 points). This imbalance opens the door to land speculation and the selection of candidates who are ultimately unable to secure the necessary financing, leaving lands that are legally "liberated" effectively frozen. In this way, the right of exclusion — once held collectively by the tribal assembly — is inadvertently transferred to failing investors and rigid bureaucratic processes. The land is leased and removed from community use, yet it remains idle due to tenant failure or an inability to mobilize financing. The tragedy of the Anti-Commons is therefore not resolved but displaced: the original community blockage gives way to an entrepreneurial and administrative deadlock, stalling the very agrarian transition that the "Generation Green 2020-2030" strategy set out to achieve.

## 6. Conclusion

This analysis ultimately positions Moroccan collective lands as a textbook example of the tension Heller identified between the fragmentation of property rights and economic efficiency. The central question driving this research was whether the leasing mechanism — the cornerstone of the "Generation Green" strategy — is sufficient to break the historical inertia of the *Anti-Commons* that has long weighed on the *Soulaliyate* heritage.

The findings from the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region point to a nuanced answer. At the institutional level, the use of long-term leases has been a genuine step forward. By separating land ownership — which remains collective — from its economic use, the state has managed to work around the constraints of joint ownership and simplify the structure of exclusion rights. This legal engineering has effectively opened up thousands of hectares for investment.

Yet translating this legal availability into real development runs into concrete operational limits. With a project realization rate of just 44% and stark territorial disparities, the study shows that removing the tribal lock does not automatically lead to land valorization. More troubling still, the nature of the risk appears to be shifting: the initial "tragedy of the Anti-Commons," rooted in community vetoes, is giving way to an entrepreneurial and administrative blockage. Inertia no longer comes from the multitude of rights holders, but from the failure of assignees and the weight of bureaucratic burdens.

For the Moroccan agrarian transition to succeed, a broader shift in approach is needed. As the experience of the Mexican ejidos suggests, legal reform alone falls short without a parallel overhaul of governance. For leasing to become a genuine driver of inclusive territorial development, public action must move beyond simply counting hectares mobilized and instead embrace a more qualitative, outcomes-focused approach.

This calls for three concrete reorientations: a more rigorous selection of investors based on technical viability rather than financial overbidding; stronger support for local project holders to prevent speculation; and greater transparency to maintain the trust and buy-in of local communities. Ultimately, the lease contract is a necessary but not sufficient condition — it is the legal key that opens the door. But only integrated territorial governance will allow us to cross the threshold toward sustainable development.

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