



PRIMARY RESEARCH

# The territorial governance of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis and the challenges of the tourism actors in the old Medina of Marrakech

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## Abstract

Tourism is facing one of the biggest crises of all time due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis faced by territories in general and tourist destinations, in particular, requires in-depth studies and special interest from researchers and policymakers. For this reason, this study aims to determine the challenges faced by tourism actors in the ancient Medina of Marrakech during the COVID-19 health crisis. To do so, we adopted a quantitative-qualitative method that allowed us to explore the field better. We used semi-structured interviews with decision-makers in the tourism sector at the national, regional, and central levels and a two-phase questionnaire sent to tourism operators in the Medina of Marrakech. The first phase was conducted remotely during the lockdown, and the second in February 2022. The analysis of the responses shows significant losses of income and employment. Thus, the main reactivation strategies adopted by tourism professionals. The analysis also shows that the management of the health crisis was characterized by centralization and monopolization of power at the central level and that there was no change in the roles of the traditional state. The said management of the crisis is, above all, part of top-down governance limited to particular protagonists, both at the national and local levels, which represents a challenge for territorial governance, given that local realities are hardly the same at the national or territorial level.

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## INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is one of the most dynamic and job-creating sectors, the most important export sector of the world economy, the means of subsistence for billions of people around the world, and the means that allows the valorization and admiration of tangible and intangible heritage. Has been hit hard by the current crisis of COVID-19. COVID-19 negatively impacts economies, livelihoods, public services, and prospects on every continent (Nations, 2020). According to available data, in 2019, tourism generated 7% of global trade, employed one in ten people worldwide, and provided livelihoods for millions in developed

and developing countries along a complex value chain of related industries. As borders closed, hotels closed, and air travel declined dramatically, international tourist arrivals fell by 56%, and \$320 billion in tourism exports were lost in the first five months of 2020 (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020). In Morocco, long before the Covid-19 crisis, the tourism sector suffered from a lack of strategic coherence, inadequate governance, and a lack of local and national coordination. Today, Covid-19 has worsened these deficiencies, and the old Medinas in Morocco represent the territories most exposed to the crisis. These territories are urban spaces undergoing continuous change

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through tourism and the revitalization of their economic and residential functions (Bryson, 2022; Farooq, Akhtar, Hijazi, & Khan, 2010; Gospodini, 2001; Komaladewi, Mulyana, & Jatnika, 2017; Kurzac-Souali, 2007). The Medina of Marrakech is a territory rich in its history, culture, and diversified material and immaterial heritage. It is surrounded by ramparts pierced by several monumental doors, housing all the historical monuments of the tourist and southern capital. It has several assets that attract tourists worldwide and keeps them loyal to its exceptional and pleasant climate throughout the year. Its spaces are felt to be full of humanity and reflect the idea of a balanced city (Bourdin, 1984; Demuyakor, 2021; Maghnaoui, 2020). The Medina of Marrakech is one of the most frequented and attractive areas of the red city. It is a typical model of cultural heritage of the imperial cities where tourism is the main activity, it has always been an attractive territory because of its historical and patrimonial richness and its labeling since 1985 as a world heritage by UNESCO.

However, following the decisions taken by the public authorities to fight against the accelerated and relentless spread of the new coronavirus, tourist activity completely ceased in the first period of COVID-19 in the Medina leading to catastrophic consequences on the socio-economic life of the latter, Hence the particular interest of this study based on a territorial approach, especially of a labeled territory it allows to determine the challenges that the actors of tourism of this territory knew during the period of sanitary crisis COVID 19 and the governance adopted for the management of the aforementioned sanitary crisis of the main activity of the Medina of Marrakech which is the tourism. This sector represents a dilemma as it is both the engine of the local economy of Marrakech and the national economy of Morocco. It is the most fragile and vulnerable industry facing health, political, economic, environmental, and natural disasters.

Thus, we formulate the following problematic question: What form of governance is for managing the COVID-19 health crisis in a UNESCO-labeled territory, and what are its repercussions on tourism actors?

This study's objective is to analyze a UNESCO-labeled territory where tourism is the main activity. Based on the speeches of all the actors of tourism impacted by the crisis of covid 19. Determine the challenges faced by tourism actors in the ancient Medina of Marrakech during the COVID-19 health crisis. At the same time, showing, on the one hand, the form of crisis governance existing in this exceptional territory in times of crisis and raising, on the other hand, the lessons to avoid any possible crisis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Coronavirus is a large family of viruses typically cause upper respiratory illnesses (Jiao, Dong, Yu, & Wei, 2021), such as the common cold. This group of viruses was not considered dangerous when MERS-CoV emerged in 2012 in the Middle East and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 in China (Song et al., 2020; Cui, Li, & Shi, 2019). However, in December 2019, a new coronavirus emerged in Wuhan (Liu, Chuang, Liu, Chien, & Tung, 2021), China. The virus has spread rapidly to almost every country, with increasing numbers of patients and victims of the disease (Zhu et al., 2020). On 7 January 2020, Chinese authorities identified a new type of coronavirus (Nkengasong, 2020). On 11 January, the number of infected people increased to 41, and the first death from the virus was recorded. The first case outside China was reported on 13 January in Thailand (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020), with an increase in the number of deaths; on 30 January 2020, the WHO declared a "global emergency," on 11 February announced that the new coronavirus would be called "COVID-19" whose name is composed of "CO" which means corona, "VI": virus, "D" disease and 19 relating to the year: 2019 (Al-Osail & Al-Wazzah, 2017; Wu, Yin, & Zhang, 2022) and finally on 11 March 2020 declared the coronavirus epidemic a "global pandemic" (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020).

Pandemics strongly influence tourism's functioning (Faeni, Faeni, Riyadh, & Yuliansyah, 2022; Khalid, Okafor, & Burzynska, 2021), as one of the main sources of contamination is international passenger traffic. Therefore, one of the main actions advocated by organizations at the global and state level is the closure of borders (land, sea, or air) to control contamination (Dieminger, Kamenshchikova, Hoebe, & Horstman, 2022). On the other hand, the fear of contamination on the part of potential travelers and movement restrictions lead to a serious restriction of mobility at the initiative of governments to fight against infections (Frimousse & Peretti, 2020). This situation has led to an unprecedented paralysis of global tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread during the months of March, April, and May in most countries of the world.

In response to this situation, the Moroccan government, following the example of other countries in the world, has put in place sanitary measures, including the closure of borders, the obligation of confinement, the control and limitation of people's movements within the perimeters of residence, namely the neighborhoods, the night curfew, etc.

This has influenced all sectors but especially tourism, which is the main activity of the old Medina of Marrakech on the one hand and has caused dramatic consequences of a socio-economic nature on the actors of tourism and their lives on the other hand.

The period of COVID-19 is an important means of learning lessons (Stenseth et al., 2021). Because the management of these atypical territories recognized by UNESCO can hardly be the same as that of the whole country, these territories have a fragile character since they live thanks to tourism. Thus, this sector has found itself in a sudden impasse due to mobility restrictions imposed at several levels to limit the expansion of the virus.

### METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

This article is part of the research conducted in the Tour-BlaCOVID project by the Laboratory of Mobility and Attractiveness Resources Studies (LERMA). It is a study on the governance and challenges of actors in the old Medina of Marrakech during the Covid-19 crisis. Our methodology consists in exploiting the results of surveys in the form of questionnaires and interview guides with all the actors of tourism present and those who intervene in the manage-

ment of the tourist activity of the Medina of Marrakech within the framework of the aforementioned project. Then for the analysis of the results, we used the principal component analysis, and finally, a cartographic presentation of the study area and the information useful to our object of study was carried out.

Our study area is the old Medina of Marrakech (Figure 1). It is one of the world destinations that make tourists dream; it is part of the most attractive areas of the Moroccan tourist capital, "Marrakech," and it presents a myriad of characteristics that make this area a tourist place of excellence (Massou, 2011). For several decades, it has undergone significant changes in the wake of its double classification on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985 and on the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity of Jemaa el-Fna Place in 2001. It is also endowed with an immense tangible and intangible heritage that constitutes an important resource for the actors and makes it the beating heart of the city of Marrakech. According to the regional council of tourism in Marrakech (CRT), in 2019, nearly 3 million tourists of all nationalities visited this city continuously. But this movement has stopped with the cessation of tourist activity in this place because of the coronavirus

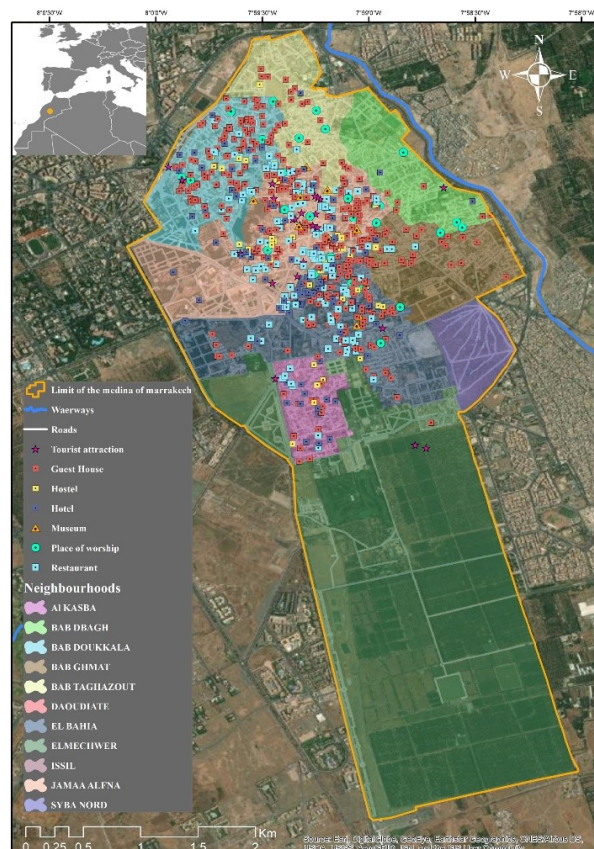


FIGURE 1. Location of the study area





surveyed, 15% have expressed their intention to change their profession after this disaster and have insisted that they have always suffered from the fragility of the tourism sector and are worried about their future and that of their families. Faced with this situation, some actors have the will to change their profession even after the recovery of the tourist activity. Others have been forced to reduce their salaries. (Figure 3). This has contributed to the increase in the unemployment rate; as stated in the statistics reported by the HCP in 2020, unemployment has increased by 2.7

points. It is important to note that the tourist offer of the old Medina of Marrakech is not based on internal tourism; for that, our respondents have specified that the revival of tourism activity after the confinement will not be possible without opening borders. As for the survival of tourist enterprises to achieve the resumption of the activity, the respondents have specified that it will not see the light of day without the support of the state that it is at the level of social or tax charges, etc. (Figure 4).

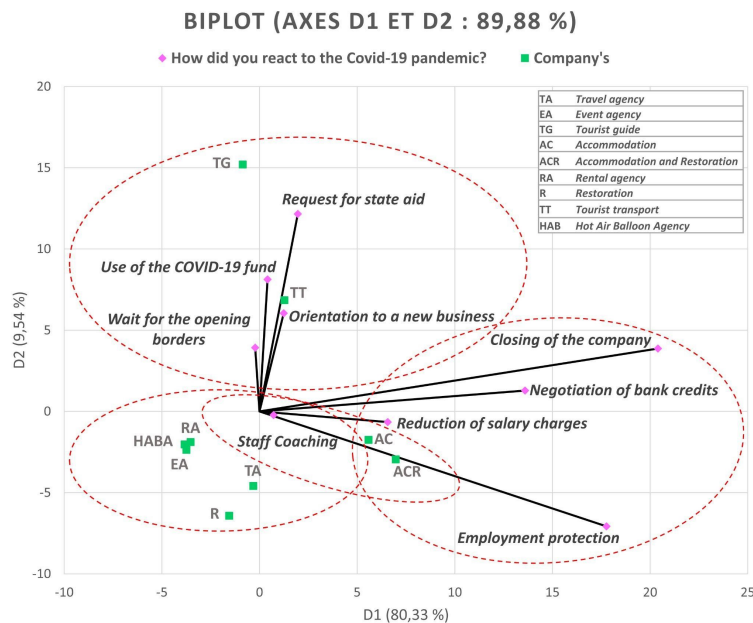


FIGURE 3. The reaction of the companies during the covid-19 pandemic

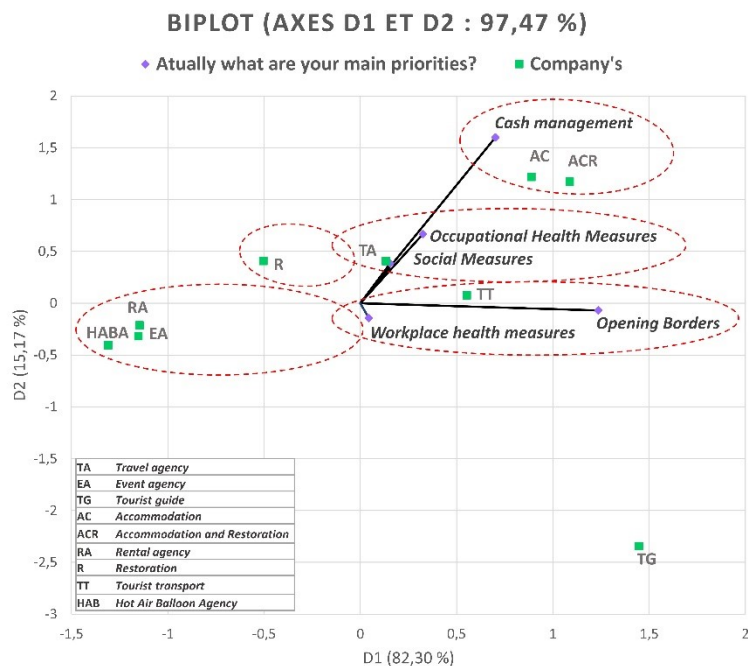


FIGURE 4. The priorities of the companies during the covid-19 pandemic

Finally, in the case of the containment of the Medina of Marrakech, the health crisis has shown the tourism sector's fragility and the limits of the strategies related to this sector. The attraction linked either to the prestigious UNESCO label or to the territory of the Medina itself has completely ceased to be "useless" following the health emergency.

Regarding juridical tools, the health crisis treatment was characterized by centralization and monopolization of power by the Ministry of the Interior. The attributions of the council of the commune indicated in article 100 of the Organic Law No. 113-14 on Municipalities (concerning combating the spread of epidemic or dangerous diseases and the power to take the necessary measures in the field of administrative policing) have been suspended following Article 3 of the Decree-Law No. 2.20.292 issued on 28 Rajab 1441 (23 March 2020), enacting special provisions relating to the state of health emergency and the procedures for its declaration. Thus, Article 3 of Decree No. 2.20.293 has explicitly entrusted to the walis of the regions and governors of the prefectures or provinces the power to take all executive measures necessary to preserve the public health system in light of the declared state of emergency (whether these measures are predictive, preventive or protective... etc.) which approves one of the measures of administrative police. However, the State chose a centralized approach instead of territorial decentralization to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This leads us to question the relevance of territorial decentralization in Morocco, the place of the law, which emanates from the legislative power, in the face of regulatory decrees and the status of the regions in the territorial management of health crises and epidemic diseases (lack of an article dealing with the management of health crises and epidemic diseases in the organic law no. 111-14 on the regions).

The crisis effect has not changed the classic governmental method of putting important decisions in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior. This reminds us of a time long ago when this ministry was at the center of power. This crisis has shown that the past is still with us, that the extent of socio-economic inequalities among tourism actors in the Medina of Marrakech still exists and that the governance of this internationally recognized territory is far from being participatory. Crisis and risk management is important for measuring decision-makers governance and capacities. For this, good governance is the only way to show how to deal with COVID-19 and possible crises. Concerted, participatory, and collaborative decision-making among territorial actors remains an emergency because the territorialization of territorial development reforms in general and the terri-

torial governance of crises, in particular, requires the capacities, knowledge, and, above all, the leadership of actors to embrace global and interdependent problems such as those of the pandemic crisis of COVID 19.

### **The Tourism Sector Tested by COVID-19 between Local and Global Governance**

According to the High Commission for Planning (HCP), the tourism sector is most affected by the health crisis, with 89% of companies having declared a total work interruption. In terms of loss of turnover, the National Confederation of Tourism has estimated the impact of this health crisis at 34.1 billion dirhams and 7.27 billion dirhams for air transport alone. Faced with this, tourism actors have faced important repercussions such as the postponement of tourism projects and the powerlessness to deal with all the problems of tourism promoters. All this has had a colossal impact on the national economy, which depends on 6% to 10% of the tourism sector.

Faced with this situation, the State has therefore put in place emergency strategies to rethink the tourism offer that existed before the crisis through the establishment of a tourism offer aimed at the locals, especially through the Moroccan National Office of Tourism, which put in place a militant slogan "Alamantlakaw" during the confinement expressing the will to build an offer intended for national tourism whose objective is to reconnect Moroccans to their country and in the continuity of its strategy of promotion of national tourism after the confinement it has put in place a multi-media campaign aimed at encouraging Moroccans to discover and rediscover the wealth of their country named "natlakawfbladna." Political speeches encourage local consumption of "Made in Morocco" products and services. National or local tourism is a temporary solution to save the situation. But this approach remains insufficient because the strategies must be at the service of internal entertainment, where national tourism is the basis of every vision with or without crisis.

This is evidenced by the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism creating its first national label, considering that the label is a perceived risk reducer even though labeling is not a priority in Morocco (El Bakkouri, 2021). This Ministry "WELCOME SAFELY" label is intended for tourist accommodation establishments that wish to demonstrate their compliance with the health safety standard. Nowadays, 199 establishments have obtained this label, including 45 in Marrakech and 7 in the old Medina of Marrakech (Figure 5). This coincides with the emergence of global labels relating to managing health crises in the tourism sector, such as the COVID-19

Sanitary Measures label, the Trusted Establishment label, the SafeGuard label, the Socotec label, the European COVID-19 tourism safety label, etc. This labeling strategy is part of

a process of governance that arises in the context of globalization, which is often dictated by the developed countries as “Holders of power.”



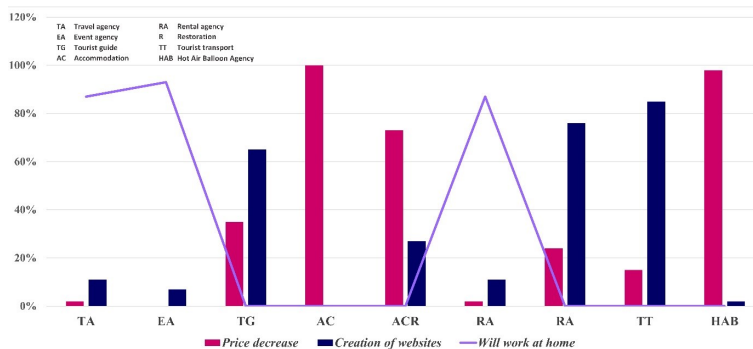
**FIGURE 5.** The priorities of the companies during the covid-19 pandemic

Nevertheless, this global governance, which is the responsibility of international institutions, represents a challenge to territorial governance, which is the responsibility of local authorities, because local realities are not necessarily the same at the national or global level. Speaking of governance rather than the government allows us to refer to an evolution in the role of the State, which now intervenes less directly and hierarchically and plays a more regulatory role (Hassenteufel & Saurugger, 2021; Keping, 2018). While, even after the cessation of containment during the said period of COVID-19, there has been no evolution in the roles of the classical state, decision-making is still central, and the strategies put in place do not reposition the tourism sector towards the local example of the label put in place by the tourism sector.

The tourism sector is a global affair requiring decisions with a global vision. However, we must not forget the local who represents the core of the territories and must be the ba-

sis of any strategy because the feeling of professional well-being of the operators guarantees the good quality of service to the tourists and avoids the folklorization on the one hand and the trivialization of the tourist service on the other hand.

Currently, many strategies (Figure 6) have been put in place by tourism operators to attract the maximum number of tourists, including price reduction, website creation of websites, abandonment, and switching to the concept of click-and-mortar. These show both the desire for recovery and profit to recover the long off-season of tourism has taken everything and the lack of awareness of the lessons learned from the crisis of COVID-19 that the world has experienced, knowing that the situation, in general, is not yet stable and it can at any time become more complicated especially since COVID 19 is neither the first nor the last pandemic that the world will know.



**FIGURE 6.** The strategy adopted by the tourism operators after the containment

## CONCLUSION

Tourism is the main activity of the territories labeled as world heritage by UNESCO, including the old Medina of Marrakech. All the actors of the territory try to have a share of this market, whether related to heritage or trade, but tourism facing the crises is very fragile. For this reason, during COVID-19, tourism in Marrakech has had a full blow, hence its asphyxiation. Tourism actors in the Medina had faced several challenges, ranging from budget and profitability difficulties before the said health crisis to significant losses of income and jobs; the aid that has been granted has been very minimal, and half of the heads of households working in tourism have drawn on their savings during their entire working period to survive during the crisis of COVID 19. Finally, tourism actors worry about their future and their families. The main strategies used by tourism operators to reactivate tourism activity in the old Medina of Marrakech have been to lower the prices of tourism services and salaries, lay off employees, close tourism businesses, and move to online marketing.

As for the government, it has put in place emergency strategies to rethink the tourism offer that existed before the crisis by establishing a tourism offer aimed at the locals. But national or local tourism is a temporary solution to save the situation. This is proven by the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism, which created its first national label in global governance. The latter represents a challenge for territorial governance, which is the responsibility of communities because local realities are not necessarily the same at the national or global level. In addition, this approach remains insufficient because the strategies must be at the service of internal entertainment, where national tourism is the basis of each vision, with or without crisis.

Therefore, the management of the health crisis was characterized by centralization and monopolization of power by the Ministry of the Interior, and no evolution in the roles of the traditional state was seen. Decision-making remained centralized, and the strategies did not reposition

the tourism sector towards the local level. On the one hand, these implications contribute to the reflection on the issue of crisis governance in UNESCO-labeled territories and contribute to the future strategies of the tourism sector in Marrakech on the other.

The tourism sector is vital for the economy of countries, which is why it is necessary to reorganize it by integrating the culture of adaptation and anticipating the unpredictability among the various actors. The management of the unexpected in tourism has become essential, as proven by the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed the course of life, hence the importance of anticipating the unexpected when implementing territorial strategies in general and those of tourism in particular. Tourism is now at a crossroads, and the measures implemented today will determine tomorrow's tourism. For this, we must think about building a tourism economy that is flexible, decentralized, stronger, more sustainable, and more resilient.

The Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity to reinvent tourism. It has become inconceivable today to think about tourism activity's growth without associating territorial resilience with crises. This is why it is important to think about training programs related to strengthening tourism to train the necessary professionals for the circumstances at risk and future critical situations. These programs must involve all the actors who have a direct or indirect relationship with the tourist or/and the tourist activity, without forgetting the embassies that represent Morocco in other countries, since they represent the channel of transmission of the messages of serenity and confidence to future tourists.

Finally, there were indeed limitations related to the difficulty of accessing data considered confidential on the one hand and the reluctance of some actors during the realization of the surveys on the other. However, the qualitative results of this study constitute a means of helping decision-making in the tourism sector and enriching the literature on the territorial governance of crises in territories classified by UNESCO.



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