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# Local development organisations in Saharan regions of North Africa: Expanding horizons

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## Abstract

Local development organisations are now widespread in rural regions of North Africa. In the past, these organisations were usually only involved in a few sector-specific activities. This study investigated the activities of 24 local development organisations in the Saharan regions of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The fields of action of these organisations have expanded in the past decade, thanks to their increased capacity to handle relations with other actors. They have become active in defining what development means at the local level, although public administrations do not yet acknowledge such a role.

## KEYWORDS

agency, autonomy, diversification, fields of action, local development organisations, North Africa

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Organisations which provide support to their members or to communities are now common in rural areas of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (hereafter North Africa). They emerged in different ways. Some were created on the

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members' own initiatives. For instance, in Algeria, communities have been managing irrigation systems for centuries on their own (Hamamouche et al., 2018). Others were created at the request of the state, for instance, public administrations created community-based organisations to undertake activities that they were unable to undertake or no longer wished to undertake (Al Atiri, 2006; El Alaoui, 2004). Other organisations emerged from a joint effort by rural inhabitants and supporting actors (Bekkari and Yépez del Castillo, 2011).

These organisations can be termed local development organisations (LDOs). They are local in the sense that their members originate from the same community and their activities take place within this community. These organisations undertake activities related to the economic, environmental and social issues occurring at community level, within small, geographically delimited areas (Langman et al., 2021). They may have or may not have a legal status.

Many LDOs in North Africa have long been involved in supporting agricultural activities (e.g., joint purchase of inputs, joint marketing of agricultural products). Many associations operate irrigation systems (Ben Mustapha Jacox, 2016; Pereira & Santo, 2018) and manage natural resources such as forests (Aziz et al., 2014). In recent decades, some LDOs have become involved in other fields of action than agricultural production and natural resources management, for instance, activities to support the social and economic empowerment of women (Ftouhi, 2020; Montanari & Bergh, 2019; Perry, 2020) or environmental protection (Carpentier, 2017). However, only a few studies have reported cases of LDOs expanding their activities outside their original fields of action. Apart from services related to agriculture (credit, farm equipment, etc.), some milk collection cooperatives in Morocco use their profits to provide other services such as medical insurance or grants to development associations (Faysse et al., 2010). Also in Morocco, associations have extended their field of action from natural resources management to environmental protection and social issues, for example, the role of women in rural society, sport, and education (Quintal & Trudelle, 2013).

These few reported cases of diversification of activities of LDOs in rural areas of North Africa mostly took place 'below the radar' of public development actors and international donors. These LDOs are now recognised as development actors but are often mostly considered as being in charge of actions within rather specific fields of action, such as milk collection or irrigation management. Lewis et al. (2020) proposed a typology of the roles of non-governmental organisations (NGOs): implementers (providing services and goods), catalysts (supporting change among community members and other actors) or partners (working in partnership with other actors, e.g. to define policies). Using this typology, LDOs in rural areas of North Africa have mostly been classified as implementers (Chenoune et al., 2017; Faysse et al., 2010). The interest of public policies and academics focused less on what LDOs chose to do and more on the performance of their (previously defined and considered as stable) activities (e.g., Giel et al., 2016).

Looking at the activities that LDOs choose to undertake raises two interrelated questions. The first relates to the 'amplitude' of their activities. Do LDOs limit their activities to a specific field of action or do they intervene in various fields of action, possibly as a way to achieve their vision of what the development of their communities should be? The second question relates to the now ample recognition by public and international development actors of LDOs. Increasing numbers of these actors foster the creation of LDOs or provide funding to them (Lewis et al., 2020). This raises the question of the autonomy of LDOs in such contexts: to what extent do LDOs decide on their actions (possibly in various fields of action) independently or do they take their decisions under the influence of other development actors? If, after answering these two questions, some LDOs are found to undertake actions based on their own view of what local development means and they do so independently, their role should be acknowledged as being more than implementers.

Many studies have addressed the two above-mentioned questions by focusing on the relations between LDOs (and more generally NGOs) and other development actors. The second question (the relation with other development actors) was often used as an 'entry point' to consider the first (the roles of the NGOs vis-à-vis rural communities). For instance, some studies were inspired by the Resource Dependence Theory, which argues that organisations change to minimise external pressures and to influence their environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). These studies describe NGOs that have diversified their sources of funding and their activities to become more independent from

donors (e.g., Arhin et al., 2018). The present paper addresses the two above-mentioned questions from a different perspective. It analyses the diversification of LDO activities in rural areas of North Africa to understand the relations they have with other development actors and their evolving role with regards to local development.

The study was conducted in the Saharan regions of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia where LDOs are particularly present and active. Civil society in these areas has created many forms of solidarity and collective action in different domains of life (Ilahiane, 2004). Some recently established LDOs are rooted in a long tradition of community resources management (Vos et al., 2020). Moreover, a wide range of development actors including public administrations, international donors and NGOs intervene in these areas. These actors have promoted or enabled the development of many LDOs.

## 2 | DYNAMICS OF LDOs

### 2.1 | Changing roles of NGOs

Several studies have investigated the changing roles of NGOs to which LDOs belong, from different academic perspectives. One series of studies investigated the changing roles of NGOs. Korten (1990) considered that different generations of NGOs emerged along with a progressive change in the way NGOs assessed development needs. The first generation of NGOs focused on the immediate needs of communities. The second generation aimed to tackle more long-term issues related to sustainable development. Later generations aimed at more intense advocacy activities by building strong links at local, national and international levels. Several studies also reported that local NGOs in rural areas of developing countries have become 'development brokers'. These organisations have become the links (and sometimes the gatekeepers) between inhabitants and donors (Bierschenk et al., 2000). These studies underlined the capacities of these NGOs to attract resources, especially through project proposals that match the donors' priorities (e.g., Funder, 2010).

In some cases, community-based organisations are considered as partners for policy design at local level, sometimes formally, sometimes informally (Banks et al., 2015; Farid & Li, 2021). In other cases, NGOs in rural areas of developing countries are deliberately barred from influencing the design of public policies (Ariti et al., 2018).

Other studies focused on the second question mentioned in our introduction, that is, the autonomy of NGOs from other development actors. One series of studies showed how some NGOs have become dependent on donors (e.g., Bayaliev-Jailobaeva, 2018). In Morocco, Montanari and Bergh (2014) identified cases where LDOs were dependent on state actors. This dependency has sometimes led to a shift from a situation where NGOs were giving importance to accountability to their constituency, to one where they focused on accountability to donors (Atia & Herrold, 2018).

### 2.2 | LDOs in rural areas of North Africa

In the past, collective actions at community level in rural areas of North Africa concerned different fields including cropping, animal husbandry, irrigation, food storage, education and religious education (Charfi, 2009; Troussset, 1986). Mutual aid within the community, called *touiza*, involved reciprocal support between families and joint activities for the benefit of the community as a whole, such as maintenance of irrigation canals (Ilahiane, 2004). These activities were organised in a customary manner, either at the level of the village council (*jamâa*) or in specific groups (e.g., irrigation communities). In the colonial and post-independence periods, public administrations encouraged the establishment of professional agricultural organisations to boost agricultural development. They enacted statutes for different types of associations and cooperatives, agricultural cooperatives in Tunisia and Algeria or

agrarian reform cooperatives in Morocco, to manage the colonial agricultural heritage. Most of these organisations were transformed or disbanded a few years or a few decades later (Amichi et al., 2011; Petit et al., 2018; Simmons, 1971).

Structural adjustment plans and the economic liberalisation of the agricultural sector marked the 1980s and the 1990s. Public administrations attempted to transfer some activities to farmers, for instance the management and maintenance of irrigation infrastructure in all three countries (Bessaoud, 2008; El Alaoui, 2004; Hamamouche et al., 2017). A series of farmers' organisations was created in a top-down way to take over these activities, especially in response to the participation paradigm promoted by international donors in Morocco and Tunisia (Kadiri, 2020). Formal water users' associations were also established within traditional irrigation systems in Morocco to act as mediators between farmers and public administrations (Bekkari & Yépez del Castillo, 2011). In Algeria, from 1990 on, public administrations set up farmers' organisations to help implement agricultural policies (Bessaoud, 2008).

The number of LDOs expanded rapidly from the 2000s on (Thieux, 2009). The first driver of this expansion was the changing national environment. Public policies and development projects in all three countries promoted LDOs (Carpentier, 2017). In Morocco, the National Initiative for Human Development and later the Green Morocco Plan triggered the creation of many professional organisations and associations (Charfi, 2009). Some of the funding agencies and programmes (e.g., the Moroccan Agency for the Development of Oases and Argan forests) offer LDOs the opportunity to propose their own projects, through calls for project proposals.

In Algeria, the stated goal of the Rural Renewal Programme, which was created in the 2000s, was to promote bottom-up approaches to the design of integrated development plans (Saidoun et al., 2021). This programme supported the emergence of professional organisations in the agricultural sector, as well as associations involved in social and environmental issues (Bouedja, 2013). Around 4000 associations were created to promote activities related to women and youth (Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The second driver of the increase in the number of LDOs was the capacity of rural inhabitants. In Algeria, where international development organisations provide less support than in Tunisia and Morocco, self-funded associations are active particularly in regions where there is a long tradition of community management (Mihoubi, 2015). What is more, the rural inhabitants of all three countries have improved their capacity to negotiate with development organisations and public administrations (Faysse et al., 2016). A variety of leader profiles emerged alongside the traditional nobility, and some leaders founded their legitimacy on their literacy and their capacity to successfully engage with administrative procedures to obtain funding (Kadiri et al., 2015).

Bessaoud (2008) proposed typologies of North African rural LDOs, while Baron and Hattab-Christmann (2005) proposed a typology of Moroccan associations. These typologies distinguish two groups. The first group encompasses LDOs which obtain funds from development actors and often have a relationship of dependency on these actors, who tend to control the fields of actions of the LDOs. Ait Hamadouche (2017) considers that most civil society organisations in Algeria display dependency on the political system. Similarly, Bergh (2010) contended that a high proportion of rural LDOs in the Haouz Region of Morocco had a passive posture *vis-à-vis* external actors. The second group comprises LDOs that obtain funding on their own, without the support of public development actors, and that maintain limited connections with public authorities (Bessaoud, 2008), while Baron and Hattab-Christmann (2005) considered that LDOs in the second group achieved some autonomy. However, there are also examples of state created or donor encouraged organisations achieving such autonomy or rather renegotiating their dependence on the state or on donors (Bekkari & Yépez del Castillo, 2011; Kuper et al., 2009).

In Morocco, farmers' organisations have long been involved in the design and implementation of plans to improve agricultural value chains. However, in all three countries, public administrations generally accord little importance to the question of whether rural LDOs should be involved in diverse fields of action to address the different dimensions of local development, either by one LDO or a group of LDOs. One exception is agricultural development groups in Tunisia, which have been the centre of extensive discussion as to whether groups responsible for irrigation management could venture into other activities (Al Atiri, 2006; Ben Mustapha Jacox, 2016). The answer was no, as the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Sea Fisheries finally judged that agricultural development

groups in charge of irrigation management should remain focused on this activity. LDOs in rural areas of North Africa have thus generally played a limited role in defining the content of public policies for the development of rural territories (Chenoune et al., 2017; Faysse et al., 2010).

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | Study areas

The present study was carried out in the Drâa-Tafilalet region in Morocco, Ghardaïa province in Algeria, and in the governorates of Medenine and Kebili in Tunisia (Figure 1). Farmed land in these Saharan regions has increased in recent decades as a result of different social and economic processes. First, nomadic populations have become sedentary (Rignall & Kusunose, 2018). Second, remittances from international migration have contributed to economic development, thereby improving standards of living while simultaneously enabling the empowerment of marginalised ethnic groups (de Hass, 2006). Third, farmers started cultivating new land outside the oases because they considered oases as restrictive (because of constraints such as social hierarchies, fragmentation of plots or inheritance conflicts) and because these new lands were seen as more conducive to individual initiatives (Bensaâd, 2011; Mekki et al., 2013).

At the same time, public authorities promoted agricultural expansion to increase agricultural exports and reduce imports of food products, especially cereals (Tayeb, 2019). Agriculture in these newly farmed lands mainly focuses on high market value crops (dates, olives, watermelon, etc.) and is usually enabled by private boreholes that tap groundwater (Hamamouche et al., 2018). However, this process can lead to the depletion of aquifers (Mekki et al., 2013) and affects soil and water quality (Marlet et al., 2009). At the same time, the future of traditional oases is a growing concern, as oases are characterised by the very small plots, the dominance of low-value date palm varieties and strong urbanisation (Carpentier, 2017). In some areas, intensive migration triggered changes in farming systems and catalysed a transition to non-agricultural livelihoods (Kusunose & Rignall, 2018).

#### 3.2 | Analytical framework and data collection

Our analysis of changes in LDOs considered two dimensions. The first is the organisations' fields of action: those defined at their creation and those defined later on. We analysed activities that provide direct services or support to



**FIGURE 1** The three study areas [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

members or rural communities. The second dimension is the resources the LDOs exploited to begin their activities and possibly later to expand them: the sources of funding and the connections developed by the LDOs with external actors. These connections were analysed according to the type of actors with whom LDOs were in touch, the media used and the use LDOs made of these connections.

Our study focuses on the scope of activities undertaken by LDOs and the means used to implement them. It does not consider—and makes no claims with regards to—the actual functioning of the LDOs surveyed. In particular, it does not analyse their governance (e.g., the way grassroots members control the management committee) or their performance (e.g., the effectiveness and impacts of the activities they undertake).

Our aim was to identify the range of activities undertaken by LDOs. Therefore, we asked actors (administration staff, members of NGOs, farmers) in the study areas to put us in touch with LDOs they considered as enabling positive rural and agricultural dynamics or having a strong potential for territorial development. The 24 organisations identified are thus by no means representative of rural LDOs in the study areas.

Among these 24 organisations, one already existed before 1980 (this is a customary organisation with no legal status), seven were created between 1980 and 2009 and the remaining 16 organisations were created from 2010 on. The number of members of the organisations ranged from 7 to 100. Table 1 presents these 24 organisations according to their legal status.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 members (29 men and 8 women) of the executive committees of the 24 LDOs. The interviews took place between June 2019 and March 2020. The interviewees were the presidents, vice-presidents or treasurers of formal structures, and in Algeria, the leaders of the customary organisation. First, interviewees provided information about themselves, including their level of education and their role in the organisation. Second, they explained the reasons for the creation of the LDO and the objectives of the founding members. Third, they described the fields of action of the organisation and why, when and how the organisation became involved in these particular fields. Finally, the interviewees identified the resources they used for each activity: the sources of funding, the actors with whom the organisation was in contact and the communication channels used by the organisation both to obtain funding and for everyday management. We also attended 14 meetings between members of the executive committees.

In what follows, we illustrate to what extent and how the 24 organisations we studied expanded their fields of action and the means they used to do so. First we analyse the actors responsible for the creation of the organisations and the first activities they undertook. Second, we analyse the diversification of the original fields of action and the emergence of new fields. Third, we analyse the funding mechanisms used by the LDOs. Fourth, we study the insertion of the LDOs in networks of actors at local, regional, national and international levels. Finally, we investigate which actors initiated the expansion of the activities of LDOs.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Original fields of action

In 11 organisations, the idea of creating the LDO and of the first actions undertaken came from the members, in nine organisations, from the staff of public institutions, and in four organisations, the LDO was co-constructed by members and supporting actors (public actors or NGOs) (Table 2).

Seventeen of the organisations studied originally focused on water management and agricultural production. Many farmers' groups already had long experience in collective action on these two topics. The customary organisation studied in Algeria had been managing water for centuries and continued to do so despite the lack of a legal status. In several LDOs, the public authorities had long acknowledged or promoted farmers' collective action on these two topics. For instance, two water users' associations in Morocco were created to replace customary organisations, to formalise water management in collective irrigation schemes and to promote agricultural development. Organisations also supplied agricultural inputs to their members or organised the processing and marketing of agricultural

**TABLE 1** Local rural development organisations analysed in the present study

	Customary organisation	Associations or farmers groups	Cooperatives or mutual companies
Morocco		6 associations (including 1 women's association) and 2 water users' associations	3 cooperatives (including 1 women's cooperative)
Algeria	1 organisation	3 associations	1 common interest group
Tunisia		2 associations, 4 agricultural development groups (including 2 women's groups)	2 mutual companies for agricultural services

**TABLE 2** Distribution of the LDOs according to original fields of action

	Creation of the LDO and choice of the original fields of action		
	Inspired by members (N = 11)	Joint initiative involving members and supporting actors (N = 4)	Inspired by supporting actors (N = 9)
Original fields of action			
Water management and agricultural production	7	1	9
Social action/non-agricultural activities	2	2	0
Environmental protection	2	1	0
Choice of subsequent fields of action			
Inspired by members	8	1	2
Joint initiative involving members and supporting actors	3	3	6
Inspired by supporting actors	0	0	1

products. For instance, olive production started in the 2000s in Ghardaïa region, but at that time, there was no olive oil mill in the region. The Salama farmers' group received funds to purchase an olive oil mill and, in that way, supported the emerging olive oil value chain.

Seven other organisations had, since their creation, ventured into three fields of action that are much more rarely considered as traditional areas of intervention of LDOs in rural regions in North Africa: social action, non-agricultural activities and environmental protection. In none of these seven cases was the activity initiated in a top-down way. Rather, the activities were developed either thanks to the members' own initiative or emerged as a joint initiative between members and supporting actors (Table 2). For instance, the Moroccan Afaq association was created in 2001 by a young university graduate with the aim of promoting sports and cultural activities and entertainment opportunities for young people. In Tunisia, a group of inhabitants created Nakhla association in 2012 to promote awareness-raising and advocacy actions in favour of safeguarding oases. None of the legal statuses of the organisations we studied (listed in Table 1) prevented them from diversifying their actions.

## 4.2 | Diversification of fields of action

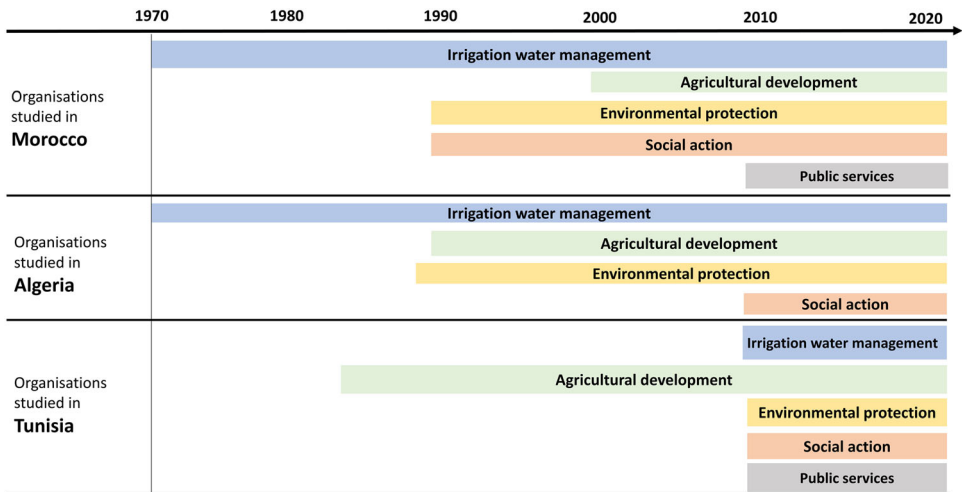
In the LDOs surveyed, diversification was first an extension of the original activities in the same fields of action, as additional needs gradually emerged. For instance, the Al Itkane farmers' group in Tunisia originally focused on



organic date farming and then expanded to develop a collective system of drip irrigation and organised agricultural training for young people. Second, among the 24 organisations studied, six were active in only one of the four following fields: water management, agricultural production, environmental protection and social action. The other 18 organisations gradually expanded their actions to other fields: four into two fields, ten into three fields and four into four fields. A fifth field of action also emerged from 2010 onwards: the provision of public services (Figure 2). For instance, the Association for the Defence of Jemna Oasis in Tunisia took over the management of a palm grove and used the profits to build a marketplace and classrooms and also contributed to the rehabilitation of the drinking water supply and sewage networks.

The LDOs extended their actions for three reasons. First, diversification was a way to better support the members in their daily activities. Second, diversification enabled LDOs to address the various dimensions of their own vision of sustainable development in their communities. For example, the Association for the Protection of Environment of Ben Isgen—APEB—in Algeria and Nakhla association and Al Itkane farmers' group in Tunisia became proactive. In 2018, these three organisations started to produce compost from organic waste collected in the oases. In this way, they obtained a natural fertiliser and simultaneously removed organic waste (which is a potential source of plant diseases and a fire hazard) from the oases. These organisations also carried out other actions to promote the transition to agro-ecological practices, such as organic farming and the use of local seeds, and the reintroduction of livestock and stratified farming (fruit trees and herbaceous crops) under the palm trees. The two organisations in Tunisia promoted drip irrigation and the creation of small storage basins to increase water use efficiency. APEB helped restore a dozen wells used for groundwater recharge from flood waters. APEB and Nakhla association helped women participate in local fairs and festivals to sell their agricultural and other products. The three organisations also undertook actions in support of village infrastructure; for instance, they planted trees in the streets and helped renovate schools.

Third, some interviewees described diversification as a way to free themselves from the control of the donors at the origin of the creation of their organisation. Among the 13 organisations whose first actions were initiated by supporting actors or were inspired jointly by these actors and members of LDOs, nine later started other actions using funds obtained from other organisations. The president of one LDO told us that ‘the diversification of the fields of action allowed us to free ourselves from the original donors and their compartmentalised vision of



**FIGURE 2** Changes in the fields of actions of the organisations studied [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

development which leaves no room for local initiative [...]. You are set a course and you have to follow it [...]. Sometimes this course is not appropriate or even contradicts the local context'.

Diversification of the LDOs' fields of action mainly began in 2010 (Figure 2). For instance, some Moroccan LDOs started actions for environmental protection. The Afgan association improved artificial groundwater recharge by diverting floodwater to mitigate the impact of groundwater overuse. The Bougafer association was created in the 1990s thanks to the initiative of some inhabitants with the aim of promoting the local cultural patrimony. The inhabitants of the village where the association is located used to wash clothes in irrigation canals, resulting in pollution of the water by detergents. To solve this problem, the Bougafer association applied to the administration in the 2010s to build a collective laundry and a small wastewater treatment plant to treat the wastewater produced by the laundry.

LDOs also ventured into social action, that is, activities linked to culture, sport, education and health. In the Tazarine municipality in Morocco, in 2016, a young female graduate created a women's association to promote the socio-economic inclusion of girls. She had observed that some girls left the education system at puberty because their parents could not afford to buy sanitary towels and schools lacked sanitary facilities. To solve this problem, the women's association organised the production of washable sanitary towels with the financial support of a French NGO. This women's association also organised language classes, sports sessions for women and meetings on women's health and rights in collaboration with national and foreign associations. In 2016, the Moroccan Afaq association started providing support for women in the production and marketing of women's articles (bags, purses, wipes) made from recycled fabric. In 2018, the Bougafer association set up a sewing group for vulnerable women (widows with children) who sought income-generating activities. This project was funded by the National Initiative for Human Development and the United Nations Development Programme. In Algeria, two organisations taught ancestral farming practices and know-how to young generations. Since 2018, in the school holidays, the boys have been introduced to the system for sharing irrigation water, learned about different date varieties and how to climb palm trees.

Most LDO activities were about providing goods or services to their members or communities. In a very few cases, the LDOs we studied worked in partnership to achieve actions not linked to service provision. For instance, the Ennadjah mutual company for agricultural services was created by the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture to supply livestock feed. In 2014, this company entered a partnership with an international university based in France. Their collaboration involved (1) the choice of topics for internships and support for the implementation of the internships; (2) support for capacity-building of young farmers and of the agricultural workforce; and (3) the development of private and collective services for farmers and other actors in the agricultural and rural development sectors and support for the marketing of artisanal products.

### 4.3 | Diversification of funding sources

Most of the 24 organisations obtained funds from donor agencies: 17 from foreign institutional donors and NGOs and 13 from state development institutions. Some organisations obtained funds from more than one donor. For instance, from 2003 to 2020, Afanour water users' association in Morocco obtained funds granted by seven foreign organisations and one public institution to plant a new palm grove on collective land and to manage it collectively. Fifteen of these organisations obtained funds through calls for project proposals. One of these organisations was a women's agricultural development group in Tunisia, who responded to a call for project proposals launched by the British Council in 2019. The call aimed to support Tunisian civil society in implementing community projects and communication actions targeting young and marginalised populations. The fund granted to the women's agricultural development group enabled the purchase of equipment for the distillation of aromatic and medicinal plants.

Organisations were also active in obtaining funds from their members, from inhabitants of the community where the organisation was based or from members of the diaspora who originated from the community. Contributions in

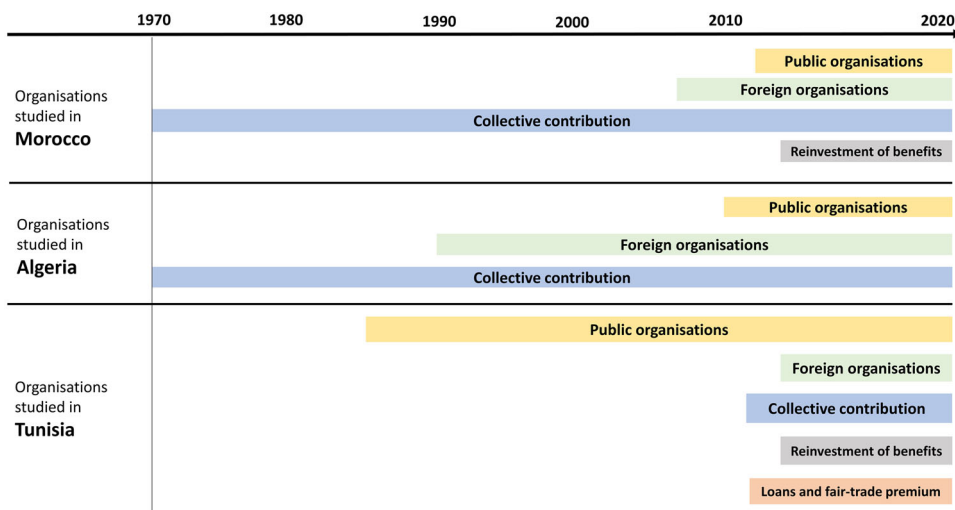
the form of labour provided by community members decreased and were progressively replaced by a financial contribution. Three organisations (among which the Afgan Association in Morocco and the Oumana El Sayel customary organisation in Algeria) only used funds obtained from members of the community and from the diaspora originating from the community.

Four organisations were able to expand their fields of action by reinvesting the profit they made. For instance, the Anounizme water users' association in Morocco used the profits obtained from collecting water fees to contribute to the purchase of a small school bus.

Some LDOs also obtained funds thanks to links with economic actors. One organisation benefitted from a loan granted by a bank and another obtained an advance on the purchase of dates by a private export firm, to fund projects in support of agricultural development. The Al Itkane farmers' group in Tunisia was part of a fair-trade certification scheme. Members of the group decided that the annual fair-trade premium should be used in the following way: 70% for agricultural development and the remaining 30% for social and environmental activities. For instance, funds for agricultural activities served to purchase agricultural inputs and tools and to maintain the irrigation and drainage system. Funds for social and environmental issues served to purchase school supplies for the children of members and to help pay to build a primary school.

The sources of funds obtained by LDOs can be categorised in five types: (1) public administrations; (2) foreign development organisations; (3) contributions from local members or from members of the diaspora; (4) reinvestment of profits; and (5) loans and free-trade premiums. Since 2010, the organisations we studied have managed to expand their sources of funding (Figure 3). Among the 24 organisations studied, 12 obtained funds from two types of funding sources, six from three different types and one from four different types. For instance, four organisations mixed grants and collective contributions. In Algeria, a public administration and the European Union paid 65% of the investment costs of the olive oil mill that was to be managed by the Salama farmers' group, and members of the group paid the remaining 35%.

The skills of LDO leaders were a key asset in the relationships with donors. First, the 37 interviewees generally had a high level of formal education (23 had a university degree and 8 had the school-leaving exam). They used their academic skills to obtain funding, for instance by applying for a grant or writing a business plan. Second, 16 of the leaders had previously acquired experience in associations while they were at university or after returning to rural areas. They had experience in dealing with public administrations and NGOs. They had learned to match their project



**FIGURE 3** Changes in the sources of funding obtained by organisations studied [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

with the donor's objectives and to meet the criteria used to evaluate proposals. For instance, a Moroccan LDO which collected, processed and marketed cumin wrote a project proposal to obtain funding. They underlined the fact that this crop was endogenous and would not require large amounts of irrigation water (and was thus adapted to climate change). They also put forward gender issues, as eight vulnerable women (widows and/or divorcees with children) were involved in one of its projects.

#### 4.4 | Participation in multiple national and international networks

Interviewees were well integrated in networks that connected them to rural development actors at national and international level. Table 3 lists some of these networks and some of the objectives they helped achieve. Belonging to national and international networks allowed interviewees to access information on funding opportunities. The LDOs also used networks to access training. Nineteen of the organisations studied had benefitted from capacity-building activities, such as professional training, field schools and national and international exchanges. For instance, two members of the Afaq association took a sewing course in France funded by an NGO. Similarly, linked to the diversification of funding sources, members of the organisations we studied often received training from different actors. For instance, members of the Etahadi Tunisian women's group travelled to meet experienced Tunisian women's groups with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture. They also received training in farming and breeding funded by the World Bank. Capacity-building activities generally focused on technical aspects, but the interviewees also underlined their interest in receiving training in managerial skills. In Morocco, only four organisations out of the 11 benefitted from training on project design and management and organisational management.

National and foreign actors also supported three of the organisations in marketing their products. Most of the washable sanitary towels and other women's articles made from recycled fabrics produced by two women's associations in Morocco were exported to France to be sold by a French NGO.

Sixteen of the 24 organisations we studied used Internet and social media. According to the president of one association, 'the web and digital communication platforms play a crucial role. They allow organisations to open up to the outside world and to 'free themselves' from their specific location to seek financial resources or training opportunities at the international level'. For instance, the president of the women's association in Tazarine in Morocco discovered on Facebook that the French embassy had launched a call for project proposals. She submitted a proposal with the support of an NGO which was accepted. Two other organisations used Facebook and WhatsApp to collect funds from community members and from migrants originating from the community who lived in other parts of the country or abroad. In both cases, the funds collected were used to build and maintain groundwater recharge infrastructure. Twelve organisations used digital communication platforms as tools for disseminating information about their activities with the aim of strengthening their links with members of the community and other development organisations. For instance, the interviews we conducted with members of the executive committees of several rural organisations in Tunisia ended with a group photo that was immediately published on Facebook.

**TABLE 3** Involvement of the 24 organisations in networks

Network of actors	Use		
	Obtaining information on funding opportunities	Capacity building	Marketing of products
Number of LDOs connected to foreign public organisations and foreign NGOs	12	12	2
Number of LDOs connected to national public administrations and national NGOs	14	10	3

## 4.5 | Proactivity of the LDOs in moving to new fields of action

The bottom part of Table 2 shows the actors who took the initiative to expand the fields of action of the LDOs. The actions labelled 'inspired by members' in this table were first discussed at the local level, and LDOs then looked for funding. The leaders of LDOs we interviewed mentioned that activities labelled as a 'joint initiative involving LDO members and supporting actors' had emerged from discussions between members of LDOs or community members, LDO leaders and supporting actors. These leaders emphasised that the supporting actors had not decided on the activities prior to these discussions.

Of the nine LDOs whose first action was initiated by supporting actors, only one LDO remained under the influence of the actors when expanding its fields of action. This LDO was the Salama farmers' group, which was created to manage an olive oil processing plant co-financed by the state to strengthen the olive oil sector in Ghardaia region. All subsequent actions (e.g., distribution of young olive trees and olive harvesting equipment) were piloted by public organisations. This LDO acted as an intermediary between the organisations and farmers to implement the initiatives identified by the former.

The other eight LDOs which were created based on supporting actors' initiatives gained autonomy by implementing new actions. Two of them later developed initiatives from the bottom up, that is, in collaboration with local communities. For instance, the Anounizme Water Users' Association in Morocco was created by the state in the 1990s to manage collective irrigation systems. In the 2010s, the young leaders of this association came up with the idea of strengthening the traditional irrigation system by installing solar pumps and storing water in a collective irrigation basin before distributing it to users. Once the project was defined, they used social networks and the Internet to look for foreign donors. In 2016, they answered a call for proposals launched by the German Embassy in Morocco and their proposal was accepted. According to the president of this LDO: 'Every year, we organise a plenary session and invite the whole community (i.e. men and women) to discuss future social projects to be financed, such as the purchase of a school bus, the construction of a nursery, and the creation of a pastry shop that will be managed by women'. These LDOs managed to find funding opportunities that did not impose strict limits on the topics that can receive funds.

As can be seen in Table 2, while only four LDOs originated from a joint initiative of members and external actors, 12 LDOs later developed activities in partnership with external actors. For instance, the Ait Matan agricultural cooperative in Morocco obtained funds to purchase a henna processing machine and transport equipment thanks to several local development programmes coordinated by different state institutions. In these cases, the LDOs often obtained funds from programmes that had already defined specific issues. These actions generally aimed to improve the income of the members through the sale of products.

Out of the 11 LDOs that had been created based on members' initiatives, eight continued to be completely independent in the choice of the new fields of actions. This was the case of Al Itkane farmers' group in Tunisia. According to the president of this LDO: 'we propose projects based on the needs of the local population. Our projects must meet four criteria: improving the income of date producers, improving the well-being of the local population, creating jobs for young people (men and women), and protecting the environment'. Once the projects had been set up, presented and validated by the local community, the LDO submitted them to foreign donors.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

### 5.1 | Increased agency

The organisations we studied managed to make use of new opportunities, such as the increased use of calls for project proposals in donors' funding process. LDOs managed to do so thanks to increased agency based on specific skills

and on the development of strong regional, national and international networks. As reported in previous studies on rural North Africa (Abdellaoui et al., 2015; Faysse & Thomas, 2016; Kadiri & Errahj, 2015; Quarouch et al., 2015), leaders of LDOs were able to use the skills they had acquired during their academic training and previous experience to 'see the state' (Corbridge et al., 2005) and the world of development actors, that is, to understand their inner functioning and how to interact with them. These increased capacities generally did not entail a 'professionalisation' process as many LDOs have no paid staff and, among those that do have paid staff, diversification generally did not result in the hiring of additional staff.

The organisations we studied achieved some autonomy from development actors, but in a different way from that described in the studies by Bessaoud (2008) and Baron and Hattab-Christmann (2005), in which LDOs were seen as either dependent on development actors or as trying to keep a distance from them. For the LDOs we studied, being independent did not mean having no links with development actors, rather, it meant being able to decide on their objectives and on their organisations' strategies on their own. Diversification of their sources of funding enabled most LDOs to avoid being dependent on any of the sources. However, in contrast with a study on NGOs in Ghana (Arhin et al., 2018), their increased independence from donors was only one motive among others or was a consequence of diversification.

LDOs managed to remain independent thanks to their improved capacity to handle relations with development actors. This had already been identified in a few case studies of LDOs in rural North Africa (for instance, Faysse & Thomas, 2016). The present study emphasises the diversity of LDOs in rural North Africa, in terms of types of activities and in terms of structure, which have become able to proactively handle relations with the development sphere.

## 5.2 | Expanding horizons

The LDOs we studied became involved in new fields in which associations in urban areas had already been involved (e.g., social action, Saaf, 2016) but which were quite new in the Saharan regions of North Africa. LDOs had a less and less sector-specific view of their role and became more ambitious concerning their contribution to the different dimensions of local development.

Some LDOs we studied followed the path proposed by Korten (1990) of change from a first generation NGO (focusing on specific needs) to a second generation NGO that aim to define and intervene according to a broad vision of what they themselves consider as 'development'. Four organisations (Nakhla, Al Itkane, APEB and the Association for the Defence of Jemna Oasis) defined their own view of a pathway towards the sustainable development of their community. They started actions corresponding to the perceived economic, social and environmental dimensions of this pathway. Some actions involved investing in public infrastructure (schools, hospital, school buses); a domain North African states have usually considered to be their exclusive responsibility.

The interviewees we met during this study put forward their willingness to address the needs of members or inhabitants. However, the diversification of activities may also have been driven by other motives, such as the willingness to seize funding opportunities, the leaders' own employment or career objectives (Ftouhi et al., 2020)—and several motives may be present at the same time. Several authors reported cases of LDOs in rural areas of North Africa in which a small elite, who were the only people with the skills and social networks needed to interact with donors, failed to share decision making with other members. The latter were reduced to a role of beneficiaries or sometimes to a role of providing labour to the organisation (Montanari & Bergh, 2019; Perry, 2020). A complementary study is needed to assess to what extent LDOs take the views of their members on the issues to be tackled to address local development into account and to identify the role of their organisations in addressing these issues. This will involve 'opening the black box' of how these organisations actually function.

### 5.3 | A partner in action, not yet in reflection

Some LDOs we studied worked in partnership with other NGOs and, in one case, with a university. However, contrary to what has been reported in other developing countries (Banks et al., 2015), public development actors did not consider the LDOs we studied as partners in defining a vision of the sustainable development of their communities. The LDOs we studied did not influence public policy design at the local level, nor were they involved in multi-stakeholder processes designed to tackle issues that required coordination and negotiation between actors at various scales. In particular, this concerned development issues that the LDOs had identified as important, but which are not covered by public policies. For instance, the leaders of LDOs in Kebili governorate in Tunisia said that groundwater overuse was a major obstacle to agricultural sustainability but that the administration was taking few initiatives to tackle the problem and no LDOs were involved in actions to address this issue.

Based on the typology of roles of NGOs proposed by Lewis et al. (2020), the LDOs we studied were widely acknowledged in their roles of implementers at local level and possibly as catalysts of change in the behaviours of inhabitants but not as catalysts of change among development actors nor as actors able to contribute to developing a vision of the development of their communities.

One major reason for this limitation is that until now, opportunities for the participatory definition of public policies in rural North Africa have been limited. This concerns the most recent agricultural and rural development policies, which have often been defined to address sector-specific issues, for example, improving a particular agricultural value chain. The limitation also concerns the integrated rural development plans designed and implemented in rural areas in the past in all three countries (e.g., Akerkar, 2015). The participation of local inhabitants in these plans was limited or loosely structured. This integrated approach to rural development was subsequently sidelined. The approach used by the LDOs studied here amounted to renewal with a more integrated view of rural development in their territories of action, but public actors do not recognise the interest of this approach.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

The expansion of the fields of action of the LDOs studied here has accelerated impressively since 2010. LDOs became active in a wide range of development issues, which was made possible thanks to new opportunities (e.g., donors' increased willingness to support bottom-up initiatives) and increased capacities. But this diversification is primarily a sign of the capacities of LDOs to define the issues and the activities that can be set up to address these issues on their own. LDOs have learned to deal with development actors in a way that means support from the latter does not weaken their autonomy.

Many studies of LDOs in rural areas of developing countries put the relation between these organisations and other development actors at the core of their analysis. In this view, the activities of LDOs were mainly seen as a sign of dependency on other development actors or as a result of a strategy to gain independence. Using the diversification of activities of LDOs as an entry point for analysis made it possible to understand the changes LDOs have undergone by considering them as actors able to define their own goals and capable of taking the initiative, not merely as actors who react to changing constraints and opportunities in the development arena.

The LDOs we studied have de facto become actors in the definition and implementation of local development. However, public administrations still only marginally acknowledge this role. Supporting partnerships between these LDOs, public administrations and other development actors, in (re)building an integrated view of rural development is certainly worth considering.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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