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Collaborative coherence as an institutional common: how inter-institutional collaboration builds sustainable FDI attractiveness in an emerging region

Maryame CHERIF OUAZZANI CHAHDI [1], Saida MARSO [2]

1. PhD student and researcher, Tangier National School of Business and Management – Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Department of Marketing, Logistics and Management
2. Lecturer and researcher, Tangier National School of Business and Management – Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Department of Marketing, Logistics and Management

Abstract

Purpose — Location competitiveness research has long privileged tangible endowments, yet territories with comparable assets attract and retain foreign direct investment (FDI) very unevenly. This paper asks whether the coherence of collective action among institutional actors — rather than the assets themselves — explains sustainable FDI attractiveness. It develops and empirically examines the concept of *collaborative coherence* as an *institutional common*.

Design/methodology/approach — Anchored in an interpretivist stance and an abductive logic of systematic combining, the study triangulates three qualitative datasets from Morocco's Tanger-Tétouan-Al Hoceima region: a structured documentary analysis of 47 institutional sources, a two-round Delphi with 10 experts, and 18 semi-structured interviews with senior institutional actors, including two ministers and several directors-general. Coding in NVivo 14 produced 63 nodes, 71 in vivo codes and 1,247 coded references (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.873$; theoretical saturation at the fourteenth interview).

Findings — The five research propositions receive strong triangulated support (overall corroboration 86.3 per cent; 6/6 convergence across sources). Inter-institutional collaboration (94 per cent) and relationship quality (87 per cent) emerge as the principal producers of collaborative coherence (89 per cent), which in turn underpins sustainable attractiveness (91 per cent), moderated by exogenous contextual factors (85 per cent). Territorial brand image is the weakest antecedent (72 per cent). A recurrent distinction separates *procedural coordination* — meeting, sequencing, reporting — from *substantive collaboration*, in which actors co-produce decisions and internalise shared rules.

Originality/value — The paper offers a novel articulation of sociological neo-institutionalism with Ostrom's theory of commons governance, conceptualising collaborative coherence as a common-pool institutional resource built on collective participation, shared appropriation and institutional learning. It thereby repositions competitiveness debates around an intangible, collectively produced and depletable asset, and provides one of the few elite-based qualitative validations of such a model in an African emerging economy.

Keywords: territorial competitiveness; FDI attractiveness; collaborative governance; institutional commons; neo-institutional theory; Morocco.

Paper type: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Why do territories endowed with broadly similar factor conditions perform so differently in the contest for foreign direct investment? The question has animated location research since Weber's cost calculus, yet the answers offered by mainstream economics remain incomplete. Tax regimes converge, incentive packages are copied within months, and infrastructure gaps narrow as emerging economies invest massively in ports, free zones and connectivity. When the tangible offer becomes imitable, competitiveness migrates elsewhere — toward assets that cannot be bought or replicated on short notice (Camagni, 2002; Barney, 1991).

This paper argues that one such asset is the *coherence of collective institutional action*. Investment attraction is never the deed of a single organisation: it involves ministries, regional investment centres, agencies, local authorities, zone operators and utilities, each carrying its own mandate, temporality and institutional logic. Whether these actors merely coexist or genuinely act as one has consequences an investor experiences directly — in the consistency of commitments, the speed of arbitration, and the credibility of the territory's word. We conceptualise this quality as **collaborative coherence** and, drawing together sociological neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) and Ostrom's (1990) theory of commons governance, we theorise it as an **institutional common**: a resource jointly produced by interdependent actors, from which none can be excluded, and which erodes when free-riding, turf wars or symbolic compliance go unchecked.

The empirical terrain is the Tanger-Tétouan-Al Hoceima (TTA) region of Morocco, one of Africa's most dynamic FDI destinations, home to the Tanger Med port complex and dense automotive and aeronautics ecosystems. TTA offers a revealing laboratory: its tangible endowments are strong and well documented, yet institutional actors themselves attribute the region's trajectory — and its remaining fragilities — to the quality of their collective functioning. Three questions guide the enquiry. What produces collaborative coherence among the institutional actors of an attraction system? Does that coherence translate into *sustainable* attractiveness, understood as the capacity not only to seduce investors but to integrate and anchor them? And under which contextual conditions does the relationship hold?

The study contributes to competitiveness research in three ways. Conceptually, it introduces collaborative coherence as an institutional common articulating three components — collective participation, shared appropriation and institutional learning — thereby bridging two literatures that have largely ignored one another. Analytically, it distinguishes procedural coordination from substantive collaboration, a difference that proves decisive empirically. Empirically, it provides an elite-based, triangulated qualitative examination of a five-proposition model in an emerging-economy setting where such evidence is scarce.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and the propositions. Section 3 details the multi-method qualitative design. Section 4 presents the findings proposition by proposition. Section 5 discusses theoretical and managerial implications, acknowledges limitations and sketches a research agenda. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical background and propositions

2.1. From endowments to institutionally produced attractiveness

Classical location theory explained investment siting through transport costs and factor prices; Dunning's (1988) eclectic paradigm broadened the lens to ownership, location and internalisation advantages. Both traditions, however, treat the territory essentially as a bundle of given attributes. A more recent stream views attractiveness as *produced* — the outcome of deliberate, coordinated institutional work over time (Sotarauta, 2016). Camagni (2002) captures the shift by distinguishing tangible territorial assets, which are substitutable across locations, from intangible ones — institutional quality, relational capital, reputation — which are not. Within this stream, sustainability matters: attractiveness that ends at the signing ceremony is fragile. We therefore treat sustainable attractiveness as a three-phase construct spanning *seduction* (winning the decision), *integration* (converting commitments into operating plants) and *anchoring* (embedding the investor so that reinvestment and upgrading follow).

2.2. Neo-institutional foundations

Sociological neo-institutionalism supplies the grammar for analysing how attraction systems actually behave. Three of its mechanisms are directly relevant. First, coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) explains the striking convergence of investment-promotion apparatuses worldwide — one-stop shops, ranking obsessions, incentive menus — and hence why formal design alone cannot differentiate a territory. Second, Scott's (2014) regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars provide a layered account of what must align for institutional actors to act coherently: rules can be harmonised by decree, but shared norms and common cognitive frames cannot. Third, the decoupling of policy from practice (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Bromley and Powell, 2012) warns that formally adopted coordination structures may operate ceremonially, absorbing legitimacy pressures while everyday behaviour continues unchanged. North's (1990) insistence on informal institutions completes the picture: much of what makes an attraction system work — or fail — resides in conventions, relationships and understandings that no organigram records.

2.3. Ostrom and the governance of institutional commons

Ostrom's (1990) empirical demolition of the 'tragedy of the commons' as inevitability showed that communities of interdependent users can craft self-governing arrangements — graduated sanctions, monitoring, collective-choice rules, polycentric nesting — that sustain shared resources over long periods. Transposing this framework from irrigation systems and fisheries to institutional life requires care, but the structural analogy is compelling. The coherence of an attraction system displays the two defining properties of a common-pool resource: non-excludability (every actor benefit from the territory's collective credibility, whether or not it contributed) and subtractability (opportunistic behaviour by one actor — a contradicted commitment, a captured file, a bureaucratic veto — degrades the resource available to all). Coherence is thus neither a private good any single organisation can produce, nor a pure public good immune to depletion. It is a common, and like all commons it demands governance.

On this basis we define **collaborative coherence** as the degree to which the institutional actors of a territorial attraction system produce and maintain a shared capacity for aligned action, and we specify three constitutive components. *Collective participation* denotes effective engagement of all relevant actors in deliberation and decision — Ostrom's collective-choice arrangements. *Shared appropriation* denotes the internalisation of common objectives and rules as one's own, beyond formal compliance — the antidote to decoupling. *Institutional learning* denotes the system's capacity to convert experience, including failure, into revised routines — the dynamic condition for the commons to survive personnel turnover and environmental change.

2.4. Antecedents, outcome and boundary condition: five propositions

What produces these commons? The collaborative-governance literature points first to the *quality of inter-actor relationships*. Trust lowers the cost of cooperation and substitutes for exhaustive contracting (Putnam, 1993); weak ties channel non-redundant information across organisational silos (Granovetter, 1973); brokers spanning structural holes hold systems together (Burt, 1992). Hence:

P1. *The quality of inter-actor relationships positively influences the collaborative coherence of territorial actors.*

Relationships alone, however, do not organise joint work. Ansell and Gash's (2008) synthesis of collaborative governance identifies face-to-face dialogue, commitment to process and shared understanding as the engine through which discrete organisations develop common logics of action; Klijn and Koppenjan (2016) show that network management practices condition whether interdependencies become cooperation or conflict. Hence:

P2. *Territorial inter-institutional collaboration reinforces the coherence of actors' logics of action.*

A third, less obvious antecedent operates symbolically. Place branding is usually studied as an external signalling device (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007), yet a credible territorial brand also acts inwardly, offering actors a common identity narrative that legitimises cooperation (Suchman, 1995). Hence:

P3. *Territorial brand image consolidates collaborative coherence by reinforcing collective identity.*

The central causal claim links the commons to the outcome. If sustainable attractiveness depends on the consistency of institutional behaviour across the investor journey — from first contact through implementation to aftercare — then coherence should be its proximate driver:

P4. *The collaborative coherence of territorial actors reinforces the sustainable territorial attractiveness of FDI.*

Finally, coherence operates within material constraints. Land availability, human capital, regulatory quality and economic openness set the envelope within which collective action can pay off (Hatem, 2004; North, 1990):

P5. *Exogenous contextual factors moderate the relationship between collaborative coherence and territorial attractiveness.*

Propositions P1–P3 identify the producers of the mediating construct; P4 carries the main causal chain; P5 states its boundary condition. Figure 1 summarises the model.

Figure 1. Conceptual model: three antecedents (P1 relationship quality, P2 inter-institutional collaboration, P3 brand image) feed collaborative coherence (mediating construct: participation, appropriation, learning), which drives sustainable attractiveness (P4: seduction–integration–anchoring), under the moderation of exogenous contextual factors (P5).

3. Method

3.1. Research design

The phenomena at stake — trust, appropriation, learning, informal conventions — are constructed in actors' interpretations and resist standardised measurement, especially in a single-region setting where the population of relevant informants is small and identifiable. An interpretivist stance was therefore adopted (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), with the model treated heuristically rather than tested hypothetico-deductively. The enquiry followed an abductive logic of systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002): the initial framework structured data collection, while the field was allowed to redirect and enrich it.

3.2. Data

Three complementary studies were triangulated (Table I).

Table I. Empirical corpus

Study	Material	Role
Documentary analysis	47 structured sources: legal texts, institutional activity reports, external evaluations, official communications	Map the formal architecture; establish the policy–practice baseline
Delphi	10 experts of the Moroccan attraction system; two iterative rounds	Explore convergences and dissensus; surface emergent themes
Semi-structured interviews	18 senior institutional actors, including two ministers, five directors-general and thirteen regional and sectoral executives	Corroborate the model against first-hand elite accounts

Interviewees were selected purposively to cover every functional block of the system (national ministries, the regional investment centre, zone operators, sectoral agencies, local government). Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, were recorded where authorised, transcribed and anonymised at the analysis stage.

3.3. Analysis

All material was coded in NVivo 14 against a tree that evolved from theory-driven parent nodes to 63 nodes enriched by 71 in vivo codes; the final corpus contains 1,247 coded references. Reliability was addressed through double coding of a sample of transcripts (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.873$, near-perfect agreement), an audit trail linking every analytic claim to source segments, and saturation monitoring — no new conceptual category emerged after the fourteenth interview. Each proposition was then assessed through a structured confrontation of the three sources, yielding a corroboration score (share of coded evidence supporting, nuancing or contradicting the proposition) and a triangulation verdict (convergence or divergence across sources). Scores are reported as analytic summaries of qualitative judgement, not as statistical estimates.

4. Findings

Across the six model components, corroboration averages 86.3 per cent with full convergence (6/6) between documentary, Delphi and interview evidence. The pattern, however, is far from uniform, and its asymmetries are analytically the most instructive result.

4.1. Relationship quality as the system's connective tissue (P1: 87 per cent)

Informants consistently described the effectiveness of the TTA system as resting on a dense web of interpersonal trust built over years of joint files. Senior actors could name, without hesitation, the counterparts on whom a complex arbitration depends; several traced successful implantations to relationships predating the current institutional map. Documentary evidence corroborates indirectly: coordination bodies function visibly better where their members share long tenures. The evidence also revealed the dark side of this strength — a dependence on specific individuals that the system has not fully institutionalised — a theme developed in a companion line of enquiry and treated here as a boundary observation.

4.2. Collaboration as the strongest antecedent (P2: 94 per cent)

The most robust finding concerns inter-institutional collaboration, and its texture matters more than its volume. Actors sharply distinguished what several called mere *procedural coordination* — attending committees, exchanging documents, sequencing signatures — from *substantive collaboration*, in which organisations co-instruct files, arbitrate trade-offs jointly and accept decisions as collectively owned. Where the second mode operates, investors face what one director-general described as a single institutional interlocutor with several faces. Where only the first operates, formally compliant behaviour coexists with contradictions the investor eventually discovers. This distinction maps directly onto the decoupling mechanism anticipated by neo-institutional theory, and its empirical salience — spontaneously articulated by informants across all actor categories — is a central result of the study.

4.3. Brand image, the fragile antecedent (P3: 72 per cent)

Territorial brand image obtained the weakest support. Informants acknowledged that the region's international visibility — anchored in the port complex and flagship industrial ecosystems — supplies a shared narrative that facilitates cooperation and pride. Yet many judged the brand to be borrowed rather than built: the reputation of infrastructures and anchor investors substitutes for a deliberately managed territorial brand, and its identity-consolidating effect on the actors themselves remains uneven. The proposition survives, but as the model's soft spot: symbolic resources contribute to coherence only when actively appropriated, which is only partially the case.

4.4. The mediating commons (collaborative coherence: 89 per cent)

Evidence for the mediating construct itself is strong and, importantly, tri-dimensional as theorised. *Collective participation* is visible in the functioning of deliberative bodies where operational decisions are genuinely co-produced. *Shared appropriation* appears in the language of informants who speak of regional objectives as their own, across organisational boundaries. *Institutional learning* is the least developed component: actors recognise post-mortems and routine revision as episodic rather than systematic, confirming that the commons is maintained more by relationships and collaboration (P1, P2) than by formalised learning loops — and is, to that extent, depletable.

4.5. From coherence to sustainable attractiveness (P4: 91 per cent)

The main causal chain receives near-unanimous support, with a phase-differentiated pattern that validates the tripartite construct. On *seduction*, informants credit coherent collective behaviour — consistent messages, rapid arbitration — with a large share of the region's success in winning mandates against competing locations. On *integration*, coherence shortens the path from commitment to operating plant, though frictions persist. On *anchoring*, informants were markedly more reserved: sustaining attention after implementation is where collective action weakens, and where attractiveness is most at risk of remaining episodic rather than durable. In other words, coherence produces sustainable attractiveness precisely to the point where the system stops exercising it — a finding consistent with the aftercare literature and pursued in depth elsewhere.

4.6. The moderating envelope (P5: 85 per cent)

Finally, informants were unambiguous that coherence cannot compensate for binding material constraints, foremost among them industrial land. Contextual factors thus moderate the coherence–attractiveness relationship in the manner theorised: strong collective action amplifies the yield of adequate endowments but cannot substitute for absent ones.

Table II. Triangulated corroboration of the model

Component	Corroboration	Triangulation	Analytic status
P1 Relationship quality	87%	Convergent	Strong antecedent; personalisation caveat
P2 Inter-institutional collaboration	94%	Convergent	Strongest antecedent; procedural vs substantive divide
P3 Brand image	72%	Convergent with reservations	Fragile, under-appropriated antecedent
Collaborative coherence (mediator)	89%	Convergent	Three components confirmed; learning weakest
P4 Sustainable attractiveness	91%	Convergent	Phase-differentiated: strong on seduction/integration, weak on anchoring
P5 Contextual moderation	85%	Convergent	Land availability as binding constraint

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The findings carry three implications for competitiveness research. First, they substantiate the claim that a decisive share of location competitiveness is *collectively produced* rather than endowed. The commons framing adds analytical bite to the familiar intangible-assets argument: coherence is not merely intangible, it is non-excludable and subtractable, which explains both why it constitutes a durable differentiator (it cannot be imported) and why it is permanently at risk (it can be depleted by any participant). Competitiveness policy, on this reading, is partly a problem of commons governance — monitoring, graduated sanctions, collective-choice rules — rather than of incentive design alone.

Second, the articulation of neo-institutionalism with Ostrom proves generative in both directions. Neo-institutional mechanisms (isomorphism, pillars, decoupling, informal institutions) explain why formally identical attraction systems perform differently and where coherence is threatened; Ostrom's design perspective explains how threatened coherence can nonetheless be governed. The empirically salient divide between procedural coordination and substantive collaboration operationalises decoupling in a form directly observable by fieldworkers and, potentially, measurable in future comparative work.

Third, the phase-differentiated behaviour of P4 refines the dependent construct. Treating attractiveness as a single stock conceals that collective action is unevenly exercised across the investor journey; the seduction–integration–anchoring decomposition surfaces where coherence pays and where it lapses.

5.2. Managerial and policy implications

For governments and investment-promotion leaders, the results reorder priorities. Investing in the relational infrastructure of the system — stable tenures on brokerage positions, structured handovers, cross-institutional mobility — is as consequential as investing in incentives. Coordination structures should be evaluated on substantive criteria (jointly instructed files, co-owned arbitrations) rather than on meeting counts, precisely to detect ceremonial compliance. Brand strategy should be turned partly inward, as an instrument of collective identity rather than external advertising alone. And because coherence is a common, it warrants explicit stewardship: charters of collective-choice rules, peer monitoring and institutionalised post-mortems that convert experience into revised routines.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The study examines a single region in a single country; its purpose is analytic generalisation to theory, not statistical generalisation to populations. Corroboration scores summarise structured qualitative judgement and should not be read as estimates. Elite informants may rationalise their own system favourably, a risk mitigated — though not eliminated — by documentary triangulation and Delphi anonymity. Future research could compare attraction systems across regions with contrasting coherence profiles, develop measurement instruments for the three components of the commons, and test the moderation claim quantitatively where data permit. Extending the framework to other collectively produced territorial assets — innovation capacity, crisis resilience — is a further promising avenue.

6. Conclusion

Territories do not only compete with what they have; they compete with how coherently their institutions act. Conceptualising collaborative coherence as an institutional common — produced by participation, appropriation and learning; fed by relationships, collaboration and shared identity; convertible into attractiveness within material limits — gives that intuition a theoretical architecture and, in the Moroccan evidence assembled here, an empirical footing. The tragedy of this particular common is avoidable; but avoiding it is a governance accomplishment, never a default state.

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