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The post-establishment void: why institutional coordination fails investors after entry — qualitative evidence from Tangier–Tétouan–Al Hoceima, Morocco

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Abstract

Purpose — Emerging-economy regions invest heavily in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), yet a substantial share of announced projects never materialises into lasting establishment. Focusing on Morocco's leading FDI region, Tangier–Tétouan–Al Hoceima (TTA), where roughly 58 per cent of declared projects reach realisation, this study asks where, along the investor's institutional journey, regional coordination breaks down.

Design/methodology/approach — An interpretive, abductive single-case design combines three qualitative sources: a documentary corpus of 47 institutional texts covering Morocco's post-2015 investment reforms; a two-round exploratory Delphi with ten senior experts of the regional investment ecosystem; and fifteen semi-structured interviews with institutional actors, thematically coded in NVivo (63-node codebook) and triangulated across sources.

Findings — Coordination is intense and improving up to the approval of investment dossiers, then falls away sharply. This *post-establishment void* — an unanticipated, transversally emergent finding — takes three forms: declining institutional attention after validation, fragmentation of aftercare across uncoordinated administrations, and structural under-allocation of resources to the post-entry phase. Two further findings qualify it: coordination rests on person-dependent relationships that make it effective yet fragile, and formally instituted coordination bodies coexist with uneven substantive collaboration, a mild form of decoupling. Land scarcity and skills shortages emerge as the binding contextual constraints.

Research limitations/implications — Findings reflect the perceptions of supply-side institutional actors in a single region at a specific reform juncture; investors were not interviewed. Analytical, not statistical, generalisation is claimed.

Practical implications — The results argue for assigning an explicit institutional owner of aftercare, early-warning tools for operating investors, institutional mediation mechanisms, dedicated post-entry resources, and the routinisation of person-dependent relational capital.

Originality/value — The study documents a specific, under-theorised failure mode of regional investment governance — the discontinuity of coordination precisely where retention and embedding are decided — in an African emerging-economy setting rarely examined through the lens of inter-agency dynamics.

Keywords: FDI aftercare; investment promotion agencies; regional governance; Morocco; investor retention; qualitative case study.

1. Introduction

Investment promotion has never been better equipped. One-stop shops, unified regional commissions, digitalised procedures and national promotion agencies have diffused across emerging economies over the past two decades, and Morocco offers a textbook trajectory: a new Investment Charter in 2022, the transformation of Regional Investment Centres (CRIs) by Law 47-18 — which instituted within each a Unified Regional Investment Commission (CRUI) to consolidate dossier processing — a national promotion agency (AMDIE), and an advanced regionalisation devolving economic development competences to elected regional councils. The country's flagship region, Tangier–Tétouan–Al Hoceima (TTA), concentrates world-class assets: the Tanger Med complex, Africa's leading container port; dense automotive and aeronautics ecosystems; free-zone infrastructure plugged into European value chains.

And yet, according to regional CRI data for 2024, only about 58 per cent of declared investment projects in TTA reach effective realisation. The gap between announcement and establishment — and, beyond establishment, between presence and embedding — poses a question that the machinery of attraction cannot answer, because it is not a question about attraction. The literature has long distinguished the capture of investment from its developmental anchoring (OECD, 2022), and the global production networks tradition has shown that the coupling between a firm and a territory is strategic, partial and reversible (Coe *et al.*, 2004; Hess, 2004; MacKinnon, 2012). Practitioner-oriented work on investment promotion identified aftercare — the continuum of services provided to investors after entry — as a distinct and neglected function decades ago (Young and Hood, 1994; Wells and Wint, 2000; UNCTAD, 2007), and evaluations of promotion agencies have repeatedly found their resources skewed toward generation rather than servicing of investment (Morisset and Andrews-Johnson, 2004; Harding and Javorcik, 2011). What remains poorly understood is the *inter-organisational* side of the problem: not what a single agency does after entry, but how the whole regional constellation of agencies, administrations and operators behaves once the dossier is approved — and why coordination that works before entry should fail after it.

This study addresses that question through an in-depth qualitative case study of TTA. The choice of terrain is deliberate. Precisely because the region is exceptionally endowed and institutionally reformed, it functions as a revelatory case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018): if coordination breaks down somewhere along the investor journey even here, the breakdown is unlikely to be an artefact of poverty of means, and its location becomes theoretically informative. The research question is correspondingly processual: *at which points of the investor's institutional journey does inter-organisational coordination hold, and at which does it fail, as experienced and reported by the institutional actors who produce it?*

Three contributions follow. Empirically, the study identifies and characterises a specific failure mode — the *post-establishment void* — that emerged transversally from the data rather than from any prior hypothesis, and decomposes it into three distinct manifestations calling for differentiated responses. Theoretically, it interprets the void through the lens of institutional maintenance work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) and of the decoupling of formal structure from enacted practice (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), suggesting that aftercare failure in multi-actor settings is less a resource problem than an interruption of the collective work that sustains coordination. Practically, it derives a set of governance implications for emerging-economy regions — foremost the explicit assignment of an institutional owner of post-entry continuity — that speak directly to the announced evolution of Morocco's CRIs toward whole-journey accompaniment.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study in the literatures on investment aftercare, agency effectiveness and territorial embedding. Section 3 details the research design. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses them and draws implications; Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature: after entry, who is responsible?

2.1. Aftercare as the neglected function of investment promotion

The functional anatomy of investment promotion conventionally distinguishes image-building, investment generation, facilitation and aftercare. From the earliest systematic treatments, aftercare was singled out as both the most development-relevant and the least resourced of the four. Young and Hood (1994) gave the function its canonical definition and rationale: post-entry services influence the reinvestment and upgrading decisions through which an affiliate either deepens or dilutes its territorial commitment, and reinvestment by established investors typically dwarfs greenfield flows. Subsequent surveys of promotion practice confirmed a persistent bias: agencies allocate the bulk of their budgets and political attention to generation, where announcements are visible, rather than to servicing, where results are slow and diffuse (Wells and Wint, 2000; Morisset and Andrews-Johnson, 2004). UNCTAD's (2007) global stocktake of aftercare codified good practice — dedicated account management, problem-solving and policy-advocacy channels, early identification of expansion or divestment signals — while observing that few agencies in developing economies had institutionalised any of it. Econometric evaluations meanwhile established that promotion does causally affect FDI inflows in developing countries (Harding and Javorcik, 2011), leaving open the question that motivates this study: whether the institutional effort that succeeds in bringing investors in extends to keeping them, and if not, why.

2.2. From single-agency aftercare to multi-actor coordination

A limitation runs through this literature: it treats aftercare as the task of *an agency*, when the investor's post-entry experience is produced by a *system*. Once established, a firm deals less with the promotion agency than with land administrations, tax and customs services, utilities, training institutions, zone operators and local authorities. The quality of the post-entry environment is thus an emergent property of inter-organisational coordination — exactly the kind of property that public management research on collaborative arrangements has shown to be demanding, unevenly achieved and dependent on trust, shared understanding and sustained joint effort (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2012; Provan and Kenis, 2008). Two insights of that research matter here. First, the distinction between the formal existence of coordination bodies and the substance of collaboration: organisations may adopt structures for legitimacy while everyday practice remains loosely coupled to them (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Second, the temporality of coordination: institutions and routines persist only through continuous maintenance work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Feldman, 2000), which implies that coordination achieved at one stage of a process does not automatically carry over to the next.

2.3. Embedding as the stake of the post-entry phase

Why post-entry coordination matters is clarified by economic geography. The developmental value of FDI depends on embedding — the construction of local linkages, supplier relations, skill circulation and institutional ties that convert presence into contribution (Hess, 2004). The global production networks perspective models this as strategic coupling between regional assets and the strategic needs of global firms, and insists on its precariousness: couplings can remain shallow, and decoupling is a standing possibility (Coe *et al.*, 2004; MacKinnon, 2012). Phelps and colleagues' work on the political economy of aftercare adds that embedding does not happen by itself; it is actively organised — or not — by territorial institutions (Phelps and Fuller, 2000). The post-entry phase is therefore not an administrative aftermath but the very period in which the durability of the investment is decided. If inter-organisational coordination weakens precisely then, territories systematically under-produce the condition of their own returns. Whether, where and how such weakening occurs in an emerging-economy region is the empirical question the present study takes to the field.

3. Method

3.1. Research design and case selection

The study adopts an interpretive posture and an abductive logic of systematic combining, in which theoretical framing and empirical analysis are iteratively confronted (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). A single-case design is warranted by the inseparability of the phenomenon — inter-organisational coordination along the investor journey — from its institutional context; the claim to generality is analytical, not statistical (Yin, 2018). TTA was selected as a revelatory and instrumental case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995): it hosts Morocco's densest concentration of export-oriented FDI, its actor landscape (CRI, elected regional council, Wilaya, national promotion agency, chambers, deconcentrated administrations, zone operators, training bodies) exhibits the multi-actor configuration typical of decentralised investment governance, and the post-2015 reform sequence makes the formal coordination framework recent, explicit and traceable. An exploratory counterpoint interview with a CRI executive from another major region (Casablanca-Settat) was used to sharpen, not to compare.

3.2. Data sources

Three complementary sources were mobilised.

Documentary corpus. Forty-seven institutional sources — the 2022 Investment Charter, Law 47-18 and implementing texts, national and international agency reports, regional strategies and institutional communications — selected for relevance to inter-institutional coordination in TTA, issuer authority and post-2015 coverage. The corpus reconstructs the formal framework, traces the trajectory of coordination arrangements and anchors the assessment of the gap between prescribed rules and reported practice.

Exploratory Delphi. A two-round Delphi with ten senior experts of the Moroccan institutional field (coded D-P1 to D-P10), drawn from the CRI, the Wilaya, the elected council, the national promotion agency, a territorial development agency, vocational training, SME support, the regional employers' association, a zone operator and the central supervising administration. Panel size follows recommendations for homogeneous expert panels (Linstone and Turoff, 1975; Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004; Hsu and Sandford, 2007). Round one submitted structured statements on the coordination–

attractiveness nexus; round two fed back aggregated results with controlled anonymity for revision (Donohoe and Needham, 2009; Hasson and Keeney, 2011). Convergence indices are read strictly as degrees of expert agreement, not as measures of the phenomenon; response stability across rounds served as the stopping criterion, and a Kendall coefficient of concordance provided an overall agreement check.

Semi-structured interviews. Fifteen individual interviews (E1–E15) with institutional actors of the regional ecosystem, structured around five open thematic blocks — everyday inter-actor relations, the functioning of joint bodies, the territorial narrative, the coordination–attractiveness link, contextual constraints — deliberately phrased in the actors' own vocabulary. Thematic saturation was monitored through a theme-emergence matrix and reached within the corpus (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Three additional composite profiles were reconstructed from public documentary sources to represent positions that could not be interviewed directly; they are flagged as interpretive composites, generate no attributed quotations and are excluded from the saturation count.

3.3. Analysis and quality

The full material was thematically coded in NVivo 14 under a 63-node codebook derived abductively — initial nodes from the framing literature, emergent nodes added and logged during coding. Inter-coder reliability was assessed on a sub-sample using Cohen's kappa, reported with its calculation perimeter and without extrapolation. Triangulation across the three sources was organised as interpretive consolidation: convergences raise confidence, divergences call for qualification rather than rejection. Quality was managed against the canonical criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), supported by a reflexive research journal and explicit treatment of elite, institutional and social-desirability biases. Participation was based on informed consent with strict anonymisation, a sensitive requirement in a small institutional ecosystem. Findings are reported below in paraphrased form, indexed to interviewees; the study reports the perceptions of supply-side institutional actors, a scope condition maintained throughout.

4. Findings

4.1. A dispositive built for the upstream

The documentary analysis establishes a first, structural result: the formal architecture of investment governance in the region is overwhelmingly oriented toward the upstream of the investor journey. The reformed CRI and the CRUI concentrate their codified missions on reception, instruction and unified approval of dossiers; procedural deadlines, digital tracking and inter-administration arbitration are specified in detail for the pre-decision phase. Post-decision accompaniment, by contrast, appears in programmatic language — support, follow-up — without equivalent procedural machinery, assigned responsibility or dedicated indicators. The asymmetry is not an oversight of one text but a pattern across the corpus, from national charter to regional communication. The formal framework thus prescribes coordination most precisely where, as will be seen, actors experience it as most effective — and falls nearly silent where they experience it as weakest.

4.2. Expert convergence: coordination matters, and it thins downstream

The Delphi panel expressed strong and differentiated agreement on the coordination–attractiveness nexus. Convergence was highest on the contribution of inter-institutional collaboration to aligned action (84 per cent) and on the link between the quality of collective coordination and durable attractiveness (86 per cent); high on the role of inter-actor relational quality (78 per cent) and of contextual moderators (79 per cent); markedly lower — moderate — on the contribution of territorial image (65 per cent). The dispersion itself is informative: the panel did not acquiesce uniformly but discriminated, reserving its weakest agreement for the mechanism (image) that both rounds of qualitative commentary described as conditional — externally effective, internally little appropriated. Expert commentary in both rounds repeatedly located the weak segment of coordination after dossier approval, anticipating the central interview finding.

Table I. Delphi convergence indices by statement (two rounds, n = 10)

Statement domain	Convergence index	Level
Quality of inter-actor relations → coordination	78%	High
Inter-institutional collaboration → aligned action	84%	Very high
Territorial image → collective identity	65%	Moderate
Quality of coordination → durable attractiveness	86%	Very high
Contextual factors as moderators	79%	High
Aggregate (mean 78.4; median 79; range 65–86)		Substantial agreement

4.3. The post-establishment void

The central finding of the study was not hypothesised; it emerged transversally. Across interviews addressing different thematic blocks, actors independently described the same discontinuity: coordination, intense and improving through instruction and approval, relaxes once the investor is established, leaving thinly covered the very phase in which retention and embedding are decided. The recurrence of the theme across unrelated lines of questioning, its consistency with the documentary asymmetry described above, and its logging as an emergent node in the research journal ground its status as a genuinely emergent result rather than a retrospective construction.

Analysis distinguishes three manifestations of the void, each calling for a different response.

Attention decay. Institutional attention is rhythmed by the dossier: once a project is validated, the effort of the constellation redeploys toward incoming files. Established investors describe — as relayed by the actors who serve them — a shift from proactive accompaniment to reactive, request-driven treatment. The decay is not a policy but a by-product of how success is counted: approvals are visible and attributable; continuity is neither.

Aftercare fragmentation. Before the decision, the CRUI provides a single arena in which land, tax, environmental and sectoral administrations are convened around the dossier. After it, no equivalent arena exists: the operating investor faces each administration separately, and problems that cut across competences — a land regularisation entangled with a utility connection, a training need entangled with a labour regulation — have no institutional home. Coordination does not so much fail as dissolve back into the ordinary segmentation of the administrative landscape.

Resource asymmetry. Budgets, staffing and performance indicators are concentrated on attraction and facilitation. Actors across the panel and interviews converge on the observation that the downstream phase is structurally under-resourced relative to the upstream, and several link this asymmetry to a reputational cost: an insufficiently accompanied investor informs peers, and the territory's standing in international business communities erodes despite promotional effort — an inversion whereby the neglect of aftercare undermines the very attraction it was traded off against.

4.4. Person-dependent coordination: effective and fragile

A second emergent finding qualifies how coordination works when it works. Day-to-day inter-institutional problem-solving runs to a large extent through interpersonal relationships — mutual knowledge, direct lines, accumulated trust between named individuals — rather than through impersonal procedure. This personalisation is described simultaneously as the system's efficiency secret and as its structural weakness: a departure or reorganisation can degrade coordination overnight, because the relational capital is attached to persons and nowhere documented, transmitted or routinised. The counterpoint interview sharpened the point by contrast: the formal framework being identical across regions, the observed quality of collaboration varies with the local investment in relationship-building around the unified commission — where that animation is present the arrangement works substantively, where it is absent the same arrangement risks running as procedural ritual.

4.5. Formal structures, uneven substance

Third, the material documents a persistent gap between instituted coordination and effective collaboration. The CRUI functions, meets and decides; actors credit the reform with real progress in dossier processing. Yet the same actors distinguish the machinery from what it was meant to produce: joint instruction has not everywhere become joint orientation, and participation in the arena coexists with the continued defence of institutional perimeters. The pattern is a mild, partial form of the decoupling classically described between adopted structure and enacted practice — not a façade, but an arrangement whose existence has at times been treated as equivalent to the collaboration it was designed to generate.

4.6. Binding contextual constraints

Finally, both the panel and the interviews rank contextual constraints. Two dominate: industrial land — scarce, expensive and slow to mobilise, to the point that actors describe coordination as unable to compensate for its absence — and qualified human capital, where training capacity trails the needs of the automotive and aeronautics ecosystems. Regulatory, connectivity and innovation factors are cited as real but secondary. Actors' own interpretation is consistent with a moderation reading: the region's exceptional endowments amplify the returns to its coordination, and may partially mask the costs of the void; territories with comparable arrangements but leaner endowments, the counterpoint suggested, obtain visibly weaker results.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the void: interrupted maintenance, not missing structure

The findings resist a simple resource-gap reading. The region does not lack coordination capacity — it demonstrates it daily in the upstream phase; what it lacks is the extension of that capacity beyond the decision point. Two theoretical lenses jointly account for this profile. First, institutional maintenance: if coordination is an accomplishment continuously performed rather than a stock once acquired (Feldman, 2000; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), then it must be re-produced at each phase of the investor journey, and the void marks the point where the work of reproduction stops — not where structures are absent, but where nobody's job is to keep enacting them. Second, decoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977): the mild gap observed between instituted arenas and substantive collaboration suggests that formal adoption can stand in for practice, and the void is the temporal expression of that substitution — the phase for which no legitimacy pressure compels even formal adoption is the phase where coordination simply lapses. Together these lenses reframe aftercare failure in multi-actor settings: less a budget line missing than an unowned segment of collective work.

This reading connects the promotion literature to economic geography in a specific way. Aftercare research established that post-entry servicing is under-provided by agencies (Young and Hood, 1994; Morisset and Andrews-Johnson, 2004; UNCTAD, 2007); the present findings relocate the under-provision at the level of the inter-organisational system and time it precisely at the transition from attraction to embedding. Since embedding is the mechanism by which presence becomes contribution, and coupling remains reversible without institutional support (Hess, 2004; Coe *et al.*, 2004; MacKinnon, 2012), the void identifies the moment at which well-endowed territories can systematically forfeit the developmental returns of the investment they succeed in attracting. The 58 per cent realisation rate that motivated the study finds here a candidate explanation on the supply side of the institutional relationship — one that complements, without displacing, firm-side and macro explanations.

5.2. The ambivalence of relational governance in emerging institutional settings

The person-dependence of coordination speaks to a broader debate on governance in emerging economies, where informal relations are often cast either as substitutes for weak formal institutions or as sources of capture. The findings suggest a third characterisation: relational governance as an efficient but non-transmissible technology of coordination, whose very efficiency deters its institutionalisation. The policy problem is then not to suppress personalisation but to convert it — documenting circuits, formalising relational good practice, organising the handover of relationships at mobility events — so that what individuals have built survives them. The distinction matters for reform design in contexts, common across emerging economies, where new coordination bodies are layered onto administrative landscapes that continue to run on interpersonal capital.

5.3. Implications for policy and practice

Five implications follow, ordered by the findings' own hierarchy. (1) *Assign an owner of continuity*: designate, within the regional dispositive, an explicit depositary of post-establishment accompaniment — an accountable function, not a new body — with identified interlocutors for operating investors. This aligns with the announced evolution of Morocco's CRIs toward whole-journey support and with long-standing aftercare prescriptions (UNCTAD, 2007). (2) *Instrument the downstream*: early-warning tools for operational difficulties, institutional mediation channels for cross-competence problems, and post-establishment satisfaction and expansion indicators in the diapositive's dashboards, so that continuity becomes countable and therefore attended to. (3) *Rebalance resources* between generation and servicing, on the evidence that reinvestment and reputation — the returns to aftercare — feed the pipeline that generation is meant to fill. (4) *Routinise relational capital* through documentation, transmission protocols and training in the relational dimension of coordination. (5) *Treat land and skills first among contextual constraints*: coordination cannot substitute for unavailable industrial land or missing competences, and these constraints condition the returns to every other measure. For other emerging-economy regions, the transferable lesson is diagnostic before it is prescriptive: map the intensity of inter-organisational coordination along the investor journey, and expect its minimum where its stakes are highest.

5.4. Limitations and further research

Four limits bound these claims. The study is monographic; its generalisation is analytical, and the void stands as a transferable proposition to be probed on other terrains, not as an established regularity. It captures the supply side: investors' own experience of the post-entry phase is reported here only as perceived by institutional actors, and firm-side designs are the natural complement. The qualitative apparatus — a ten-expert panel, fifteen interviews, sub-sample reliability checks — supports interpretation, not measurement; convergence indices are heuristic markers of agreement. And the data are situated in a reform sequence still unfolding, inviting longitudinal follow-up. Each limit charts an extension: multi-region comparison within a constant national framework, investor-side studies of the void's consequences for reinvestment and divestment, and evaluation designs for aftercare institutionalisation as regions adopt it.

6. Conclusion

Regions of emerging economies have learned to attract; this study documents how the same institutional systems can fail to hold. In Morocco's most FDI-intensive region, coordination that functions — formally organised, expertly staffed, relationally lubricated — up to the approval of investment dossiers thins abruptly beyond it, in three concurrent forms: attention decay, aftercare fragmentation and resource asymmetry. The post-establishment void names this pattern; interrupted maintenance work and mild structural decoupling explain it; and its remedy begins, undramatically, with making someone responsible for what happens after the signature. Attraction fills pipelines; it is continuity that builds territories.

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