

PUBLIC POLICIES AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES IN MOROCCO: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO PERCEPTIONS

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Article received on: 11/12/2023

Article accepted on: 30/01/2024

Maryem Jmahri*

*Doctoral Student in Economics and Management
Interdisciplinary research laboratory on organisations -Chouaib Doukkali University
jmahri.maryem@ucd.ac.ma

Younna Toubi**

**PhD Candidate and Researcher
Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences – Chouaib Doukkali University
toubi.younna@ucd.ac.ma

Issam El filali*

*Professor-Researcher at ENCG-EL JADIDA
Interdisciplinary research laboratory on organisations -Chouaib Doukkali University
issam_elfilali@yahoo.fr

Amina Khalloufi**

**Professor -Researcher
**Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences – Chouaib Doukkali University
khalloufi2012@hotmail.com

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

Economic inequality continues to undermine social cohesion in Morocco, raising concerns about the effectiveness of public policies. Although several programs have been introduced to reduce poverty and improve access to services, their impact remains contested. This study provides a qualitative analysis of perceptions from citizens, experts, and institutional actors, based on 100 semi-structured interviews analysed with NVivo through a thematic approach. The results reveal contrasting views: while some acknowledge progress, many express distrusts of institutions, citing unfairness, limited transparency, and unequal access to programs. The findings highlight that effectiveness is judged not only by policy design but also by social legitimacy and citizen participation, calling for greater transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness in public action.

Keywords: Economic Inequality. Public Policy. Citizen Perception. Institutional Trust. Perceived Effectiveness.

Resumo

Economic inequality continues to undermine social cohesion in Morocco, raising concerns about the effectiveness of public policies. Although several programs have been introduced to reduce poverty and improve access to services, their impact remains contested. This study provides a qualitative analysis of perceptions from citizens, experts, and institutional actors, based on 100 semi-structured interviews analyzed with NVivo through a thematic approach. The results reveal contrasting views: while some acknowledge progress, many express distrusts of institutions, citing unfairness, limited transparency, and unequal access to programs. The findings highlight that effectiveness is judged not only by policy design but also by social legitimacy and citizen participation, calling for greater transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness in public action.

Palavras-chave: Desigualdade Econômica. Políticas Públicas. Percepção do Cidadão. Confiança Institucional. Eficácia Percebida.



1 INTRODUCTION

Reducing economic inequality is one of the most complex and urgent challenges facing developing countries today. While economic growth can help lift people out of poverty, it does not automatically ensure equitable outcomes. In countries like Morocco, where disparities are both regional and structural, tackling inequality requires deliberate and sustained policy interventions (World Bank, 2022).

Over the past two decades, Moroccan authorities have introduced a variety of reforms aimed at promoting inclusive development. These include the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), efforts to expand social protection, and successive rounds of tax reform designed to enhance fairness and reduce income concentration. These initiatives reflect a broader policy shift toward more socially responsive governance and a renewed focus on vulnerable populations (OECD, 2023).

Yet, despite these measures, the gap between policy intentions and real-world impact remains considerable. Socioeconomic disparities continue to persist between rural and urban populations, between regions, and among different socioeconomic groups. The Gini coefficient remains relatively high at around 0.39, and recent national data reveal ongoing challenges related to access, opportunity, and inclusion (HCP, 2021). Moreover, public sentiment often reflects a sense of scepticism, with citizens questioning whether public policies are truly reaching those who need them most.

In this context, technical evaluations and macroeconomic indicators alone are insufficient to assess the effectiveness of public policies. It becomes essential to ask how these policies are perceived by those affected: citizens, experts, and institutional actors alike. Perception shapes legitimacy, trust, and willingness to engage all of which are key to a policy's success (Van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2020).

This study aims to explore how public policies in Morocco are perceived in terms of their effectiveness in reducing economic inequality. Using a qualitative methodology, it draws on semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of individuals to better understand their experiences, critiques, and recommendations.

The article is structured into three main sections: a review of the existing literature to provide theoretical grounding, a methodological section outlining the research approach, and an analysis of the interview findings, followed by a discussion and concluding remarks.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Key concepts and theoretical foundations

2.1.1 *Public policy and its role in economic regulation*

Public policy refers to the structured set of actions, decisions, and instruments used by governments to address complex societal issues. In the realm of economic regulation, it plays a key role in correcting market failures, redistributing wealth, and ensuring inclusive development (Muller, 2015). For developing countries, especially those with historical structural inequalities, public policy is more than just administrative it becomes a tool for socio-economic transformation.

In Morocco, public policy has evolved through targeted social programs, institutional reforms, and fiscal restructuring. Initiatives like the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) and the expansion of social protection are part of the state's broader attempt to tackle exclusion and economic disparity (World Bank, 2022). While these programs demonstrate commitment, researchers increasingly call for deeper structural changes to ensure sustainable impact (OECD, 2023).

Recent scholarship also emphasizes the role of **policy coherence** and **intersectoral coordination** in determining success. When policies addressing poverty, education, health, and employment are designed and implemented in silos, their impact tends to be limited or even contradictory (UN ESCWA, 2021). In Morocco, fragmented implementation has been identified as a recurring obstacle to achieving holistic development outcomes.

2.1.2 *Economic inequality: indicators and measurements*

Economic inequality can be analysed through various lenses income, wealth, access to services, and opportunity. The Gini coefficient remains one of the most widely used indicators, where higher values indicate greater inequality. In Morocco, this coefficient has remained relatively high, around 0.39, with significant disparities between urban and rural populations and across regions (HCP, 2021).

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) and the Human Development Index (HDI) also offer valuable perspectives by incorporating health, education, and living standards (UNDP, 2022). Although Morocco has made gains in reducing extreme poverty, gaps in access to quality education, healthcare, and employment continue to reinforce cycles of vulnerability, particularly in marginalized regions (AfDB, 2022).

Moreover, wealth inequality a dimension less frequently measured remains considerably higher than income inequality in many developing countries, including Morocco. Recent global studies reveal that wealth accumulation among elites has accelerated, often outpacing the redistributive capacity of the state (World Inequality Report, 2022). These structural patterns create long-term barriers to social mobility, making policy interventions more complex and politically sensitive.

2.1.3 Perceptions of public policy: trust, legitimacy, and policy effectiveness

In recent years, researchers have increasingly emphasized the role of public perception and trust in determining the success of public policies. Perceived fairness, transparency, and responsiveness can significantly influence how people engage with state initiatives (Van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2020). A policy may be technically sound, but if citizens view it as unjust or opaque, it risks being rejected or ignored.

In the Moroccan context, surveys and qualitative studies point to widespread scepticism regarding the state's ability to deliver fair and effective public services (Chikhaoui, 2020). Limited citizen participation, bureaucratic opacity, and lack of communication contribute to a perception gap between what is promised and what is experienced. Scholars argue that restoring institutional legitimacy requires moving beyond outcomes to also consider how policies are perceived, discussed, and felt by citizens (Lind & Arndt, 2016).

There is also a growing interest in the concept of “policy feedback”, which refers to the way citizens' experiences with policies shape their future political attitudes and behaviour (Soss & Schram, 2007). In contexts where beneficiaries feel disrespected, stigmatized, or excluded during the delivery of public services, this can reduce trust in future initiatives even if those initiatives are well-designed. Exploring this dynamic in Morocco can shed light on long-term attitudes toward state-led reforms.

2.2 Existing research and comparative insights

Recent studies have highlighted Morocco's progress in expanding social coverage and reducing monetary poverty. Reports from the World Bank (2022) and the Haut Commissariat au Plan (2021) document improvements in basic infrastructure, education access, and targeted support programs. However, these advances often fall short in addressing structural inequality, especially when public programs are poorly coordinated or insufficiently monitored.

Belghazi (2019) argues that Morocco's social interventions lack strategic alignment and sometimes fail to reach the most vulnerable populations due to weak targeting and administrative inefficiencies. Similarly, Benchekroun (2020) critiques the

country's tax reforms for focusing too narrowly on revenue optimization without sufficiently addressing the redistributive function of taxation.

Comparative research from countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Tunisia shows that effective inequality-reduction policies tend to combine technical design with participatory governance and strong institutional accountability. For example, Brazil's Bolsa Família and Mexico's Prosper programs gained traction not only because of their targeting efficiency but also due to regular monitoring and citizen feedback mechanisms (Lustig, 2018).

Additionally, the role of decentralization and local governance has gained prominence in comparative literature. Studies show that local-level implementation of national policies when backed by adequate resources and autonomy can enhance responsiveness and reduce spatial inequalities (Smoke, 2015). In Morocco, despite formal advances in regionalization, many local governments still lack the capacity to effectively manage and adapt social programs to local needs (OECD, 2023).

2.3 Research gaps and justification

Despite increasing interest in the outcomes of public policy in Morocco, most existing research remains focused on quantitative evaluations and institutional frameworks. These analyses are vital but tend to overlook the human dimension how individuals interpret, experience, and respond to public interventions.

There is also a lack of qualitative, perception-based studies that explore how public policy is understood and judged by its intended beneficiaries. This gap is particularly relevant in a country like Morocco, where state-society relations are marked by a history of uneven development, institutional opacity, and regionally differentiated experiences.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated inequalities and challenged state responsiveness, the need to better understand the social reception of public policies has become more urgent (OECD, 2023). Citizens' voices, perceptions, and expectations are essential components in assessing the legitimacy and long-term viability of reforms.

This study seeks to address this gap by adopting a qualitative, bottom-up approach that centers on lived experiences and perceptions. Through semi-structured interviews

with citizens, experts, and institutional actors, it aims to generate insights that can inform more inclusive and responsive policy design in Morocco.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at exploring how public policies implemented in Morocco are perceived in terms of their effectiveness in reducing economic inequality. A qualitative approach was considered particularly relevant, as it provides the tools to capture the complexity of individual perceptions, lived experiences, and expectations dimensions often overlooked in standard quantitative evaluations. The exploratory nature of the research further justified this choice, since the objective was to uncover narratives of trust or scepticism toward public action, rather than to test predefined hypotheses.

3.2 Sampling strategy and participant profiles

The study relied on purposive sampling to ensure diversity of perspectives. A total of one hundred participants were recruited through local associations, professional networks in academia and public administration, and snowball sampling, which allowed participants to recommend other individuals. This approach made it possible to access voices that might otherwise remain invisible, particularly among socially marginalized groups. The sample included citizens from varied socio-economic and geographic contexts (both urban and rural), experts such as policy scholars and economists, and institutional actors including civil servants, NGO representatives, elected officials, and public agency staff. This diversity was designed to enable a comparative analysis of the perspectives of those who design policies, those who implement them, and those who directly experience their consequences.

Table 1*Results*

Participant Category	Examples of Profiles	Purpose in the Study
Citizens	Urban and rural residents, men and women, various age groups, direct and indirect beneficiaries of programs	To capture lived experiences and perceptions of policy effectiveness
Experts	Policy scholars, economists, consultants	To provide analytical perspectives on design and outcomes
Institutional actors	Civil servants, NGO staff, elected officials, agency representatives	To highlight institutional dynamics and implementation challenges

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected between November 2024 and February 2025 through one hundred semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in French or Moroccan Arabic, depending on the participants' preferences. Prior informed consent was obtained, and interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and anonymized. The number of interviews was determined by two main criteria: the principle of maximum variation, ensuring representation across gender, social status, geographic regions, and policy roles; and the point of saturation, reached when additional interviews no longer produced new insights. A flexible interview guide was employed to provide consistency across interviews while leaving space for spontaneous narratives. Topics covered included perceptions of policy effectiveness, barriers to implementation, trust in public institutions, perceptions of fairness and transparency, and expectations for reform.

3.4 Ethics and informed consent

Ethical considerations were central to this research. All participants were informed of the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without justification. Informed consent was systematically obtained either verbally or in writing prior to each interview. To ensure confidentiality, all data were anonymized and processed in compliance with established standards in social research. This commitment to ethical integrity safeguarded both the dignity and the privacy of participants.

3.5 Data analysis using NVivo 10

The transcripts were imported into NVivo 10, a qualitative analysis software that facilitated systematic coding and exploration of thematic patterns. The analysis followed the thematic approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), combining inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge organically from participants' discourse, while deductive coding was guided by key concepts drawn from the literature, such as inequality, institutional trust, and policy perception. The coding process generated thematic categories including access to services, territorial equity, transparency, institutional distrust, and citizen recommendations. NVivo enabled the quantification of recurring themes, comparison of narratives across participant groups (citizens versus experts, urban versus rural), and visualization of co-occurrences through matrix queries and concept maps. This rigorous approach strengthened both the validity and transparency of the analysis.

3.6 Analytical framework and references

The methodological process drew on established frameworks in qualitative research. The conduct of semi-structured interviews was guided by the principles set out by Blanchet and Gotman (2010), while the sampling strategy was inspired by Patton's (2015) guidelines on maximum variation sampling. Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, which balances analytical rigor with interpretive flexibility. These methodological anchors ensured that the study was carried out with both robustness and credibility.

3.7 Limitations of the study

As with any qualitative research, this study does not aim for statistical generalization. Instead, it seeks to produce contextualized and in-depth knowledge about how public policy is perceived and experienced in Morocco. While the findings cannot be extended to the entire population, the diversity of the sample, the triangulation of perspectives, and the systematic nature of the analysis lend credibility and transferability to the results. By foregrounding voices that are often absent from public debate, this study

highlights not only the technical outcomes of policies but also their social legitimacy and the conditions necessary for trust and inclusiveness in governance.

4 INTERVIEW RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents a thematic analysis of the 100 semi-structured interviews conducted for this study. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the analysis is organized around three key themes: general perceptions of public policies, identified strengths and weaknesses, and participants' recommendations. These themes emerged inductively from the data and reflect both convergence and divergence in the perspectives of citizens, experts, and institutional actors.

4.1 General perception of public policies

A dominant theme across the interviews was the ambivalent or negative perception of the effectiveness of public policies in reducing economic inequalities. While a minority of participants acknowledged tangible progress, the majority expressed either scepticism or outright distrust toward the public institutions responsible for designing and implementing these policies.

Among citizens, especially those from rural or marginalized urban areas, lack of awareness of existing social programs was frequently mentioned. Several interviewees indicated they were unfamiliar with the mechanisms for accessing aid or felt excluded due to information asymmetry and bureaucratic opacity.

"We hear that there are programs, but we don't know who benefits or how to apply." (Interviewee, Female, 29, Rural Region)

This aligns with findings from Chikhaoui (2020), who notes that public communication strategies in Morocco often fail to reach the populations most in need. Moreover, even when programs are known, citizens tend to question their fairness, expressing doubts about whether support is distributed based on objective criteria or political favoritism.

Experts and institutional actors confirmed the erosion of public trust, linking it to a broader crisis of legitimacy. One public servant noted:

“People believe the system favors the well-connected, and unfortunately, in some cases, they’re right.” (Interviewee, Male, Civil Servant, Rabat)

These narratives support the argument that perceived legitimacy is as crucial as technical efficacy (Van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2020). A technically sound policy may fail if it is not viewed as fair, transparent, or inclusive by its intended beneficiaries.

4.2 Strengths and weaknesses identified

Despite the predominance of criticism, several positive dimensions of current public policy were acknowledged. A number of participants, particularly among institutional actors and some urban citizens, cited cash transfer programs for widows and orphans, expanded health infrastructure, and school support initiatives as evidence of meaningful interventions.

These programs were seen as contributing to poverty alleviation, particularly when implemented in coordination with local associations. This observation aligns with previous evaluations by the World Bank (2022), which underline the role of targeted support mechanisms in mitigating extreme poverty in Morocco.

However, such positives were often described as exceptions rather than norms, with significant variation in effectiveness depending on the region and the administrative entity responsible. The most frequently cited weaknesses included:

Excessive bureaucracy: Many participants described administrative processes as complex, slow, and often intimidating.

Inefficient targeting: Interviewees repeatedly stated that aid does not always reach the most vulnerable, citing cases where “those who need it the least benefit the most.”

Lack of territorial equity: Rural residents were particularly vocal about the urban bias in policy implementation. One participant noted:

“We are Moroccans too, but we don’t see the state here unless it’s election season.” (Interviewee, Male, 46, Rural Community)

These criticisms echo those of Belghazi (2019), who highlighted both the administrative weaknesses and the disconnect between central-level policy design and local realities. OECD (2023) further emphasizes that the lack of coordination across sectors and governance levels continues to undermine the coherence and impact of Moroccan social policy.

Additionally, experts expressed concern that fiscal policies, although reformed in recent years, remain primarily geared toward revenue collection rather than redistribution. This reinforces structural inequality, especially when indirect taxes weigh heavily on low-income households (Benchebkroun, 2020).

5 PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants from all groups citizens, experts, and institutional actors offered constructive recommendations to improve the design and implementation of public policies. These recommendations largely converged around three core areas:

5.1 Improving transparency and communication

Citizens stressed the need for clearer, more accessible information about available services and eligibility criteria. Experts recommended public dashboards and participatory monitoring mechanisms to track policy implementation and ensure accountability.

5.2 Enhancing local governance

Many interviewees highlighted the importance of decentralized decision-making and greater autonomy for local authorities. This was especially emphasized in rural regions, where central policies often fail to respond to local needs. This recommendation aligns with international findings on the value of subnational governance in addressing inequality (Smoke, 2015).

5.3 Institutionalizing citizen participation

Several participants advocated for more structured forms of citizen consultation, especially during the policy design phase. Comparative examples such as Mexico's social feedback mechanisms or Brazil's participatory councils were cited by experts as potential models (Lustig, 2018).

“People want to be involved not just as voters, but as stakeholders.” (Interviewee, Policy Expert, Casablanca)

These suggestions underscore the importance of not only evaluating policy outcomes but also listening to those affected, as argued by Lind & Arndt (2016). Incorporating citizen voice into the policy cycle may help rebuild trust and ensure that reforms are not only effective, but also perceived as legitimate and fair.

6 DISCUSSION

This section discusses the empirical findings in light of existing literature on public policy effectiveness, institutional trust, and inequality in Morocco and similar contexts. It explores points of convergence and divergence between participants’ perceptions and prior research, examines the roots of the perception–reality gap, and highlights implications for more responsive and inclusive public decision-making.

6.1 Comparison with existing studies

The results of this study both support and extend existing literature on public policy in Morocco. Previous reports by the World Bank (2022) and OECD (2023) have recognized significant efforts made by the Moroccan state in expanding social protection, health coverage, and access to basic infrastructure. These findings were echoed by several institutional actors in the interviews who cited improvements in service delivery, particularly in urban areas.

However, this study also reveals that the perception of public policy effectiveness remains largely negative among citizens, particularly in marginalized regions. This supports earlier observations by Yerkes and Javornik (2019), who argue that macro-level evaluations often fail to capture the lived realities of beneficiaries, especially in countries where implementation is fragmented and communication is weak.

Furthermore, the widespread mistrust in institutions aligns with findings from Van de Walle and Migchelbrink (2020), who emphasize that legitimacy and perceived fairness are critical components of public policy success. While national statistics may report positive trends, the public remains sceptical if these improvements are not visible, accessible, or perceived as fair.

In short, the findings confirm that technical efficiency alone does not guarantee public trust, and that citizen perceptions are shaped by direct experiences, social context, and institutional responsiveness (Lind & Arndt, 2016).

6.2 Interpretation of the gap between perception and reality

One of the central findings of this study is the disconnect between the formal design of public policies and how they are experienced by citizens. Several factors contribute to this gap:

Information asymmetry: As noted by multiple interviewees, there is often limited knowledge about the existence, eligibility criteria, or procedures associated with public programs. This is consistent with research from the OECD (2022), which highlights communication failures as a recurring issue in social policy implementation across MENA countries.

Uneven implementation: Even well-designed policies may fail when local institutions lack the capacity or autonomy to adapt them to local needs. Smoke (2015) argues that decentralization without adequate resources and coordination can lead to further fragmentation and exacerbate territorial inequalities a challenge clearly reflected in this study.

Administrative burden and procedural complexity: Many participants described bureaucratic procedures as confusing and discouraging. This aligns with studies on "administrative burden" in social welfare systems, which show that complexity and opacity can reduce take-up among vulnerable populations (Herd & Moynihan, 2019).

Historical patterns of exclusion and favoritism: In Morocco, as in other post-colonial states, citizen–state relations are shaped by long-standing narratives of clientelism and selective access to services. These dynamics contribute to deep-seated perceptions of injustice, even when reforms are made in good faith.

This perception–reality gap does not necessarily imply that public policies are ineffective in objective terms, but rather that their legitimacy and social embeddedness are lacking especially in the eyes of those they are meant to support.

6.3 Implications for public decision-making

The insights generated by this study have several implications for improving the design, implementation, and reception of public policies in Morocco.

First, policy effectiveness must be understood as a multidimensional concept that includes not only measurable outcomes (such as poverty reduction rates or education indicators) but also citizen trust, procedural justice, and inclusiveness (Gisselquist, 2014). A program that is efficient but perceived as unfair or inaccessible may ultimately fail to achieve its objectives.

Second, the findings call for a strengthening of participatory governance mechanisms. Involving citizens especially marginalized groups in the formulation, monitoring, and evaluation of public programs can enhance ownership and transparency. Comparative evidence from Latin America has shown that participatory budgeting and local councils improve both outcomes and perceptions (Avritzer, 2020).

Third, there is an urgent need to invest in local governance capacity. Decentralized institutions must be equipped with the technical, financial, and human resources to implement and adapt policies to their specific contexts. As the OECD (2023) notes, effective territorial equity requires not just administrative devolution but also coherent vertical coordination.

Finally, improving public communication and accountability is essential. Clear, accessible, and culturally adapted information about public programs can reduce the perception gap and build trust. This includes not only dissemination of information but also establishing feedback loops through complaint mechanisms, citizen audits, or public scorecards.

In sum, the effectiveness of public policy in reducing inequality is not only a matter of design or funding, but also of legitimacy, trust, and participation. A truly inclusive policy framework must place these elements at the center of governance reform.

7 CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on how citizens, experts, and institutional actors perceive the effectiveness of public policies in Morocco in addressing persistent economic inequalities. While some acknowledge progress in reducing poverty and improving

access to services, many highlights persistent shortcomings linked to unfairness, lack of transparency, and uneven distribution of benefits.

The originality of this research lies in its qualitative approach, which places the voices of those directly concerned at the center of the analysis. By combining these perspectives with a thematic analysis conducted through NVivo, the study goes beyond conventional statistical indicators and underscores the crucial role of perception and social legitimacy in evaluating public action. Effectiveness, therefore, is not only a matter of policy design but also of citizen ownership and institutional trust.

In this respect, the study makes a dual contribution: methodologically, by demonstrating the heuristic value of large-scale qualitative inquiry in public policy research; and substantively, by highlighting the need to restore social legitimacy as a cornerstone of both policy effectiveness and fiscal justice. These insights open avenues for comparative research, particularly in other countries of the Global South, where trust, transparency, and inclusion are essential to the success of reforms.

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