

# Rural tourism in Morocco: a missed opportunity before and after covid-19! Case study of Fez-Meknes region

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## Abstract

International tourism bodies consider rural tourism as a lever for economic development that contributes to the reduction of rural poverty and the stability of this population and the revitalization of rural areas. Like tourist countries, Morocco is committed to several tourism strategies insofar as it presents resources in natural environment and biodiversity as well as cultural riches and remarkable traditions. However, the tourist offer that is concentrated on the coast is almost absent in the hinterland and rural destinations. This strategic choice has produced shortfalls and particularly in times of the covid-19 pandemic for tourism operators and for Morocco, whose Fez-Meknes Region is a good example for the consequences of the concentration of supply on seaside tourism.

**Keywords**— Rural tourism, Poverty, PAT, Fez-Meknes region, Covid-19.

## I. Introduction

Tourism is an ancient activity, which has taken on a global dimension in the twentieth century. It has become a fundamental economic sector in many developed and developing countries alike, making it an essential factor in their development.

Certainly, in 2019, the G20 countries called on country representatives to promote tourism's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This belief results from the sector's ability to create decent jobs, enable vulnerable and poor people to access the necessary means and participate in the preservation of the environment (ILO, 2019). Tourism is considered as a powerful driver of economic growth as it accounts for 15% of global employment, 10% of global GDP, \$1700 billion in global exports and \$61.8 billion in global FDI (UNWTO, 2019).

Since 2000, tourism has become one of the sectors that

the State has chosen, after agriculture, at the top of its economic policy priorities. This importance results

from its contribution to the creation of employment items and foreign exchange earnings. It is in this ambition that the State has implemented two major tourism strategies vision 2010 and vision 2020. Those two visions' objectives were to strengthen the natural and cultural positioning and to implement new mechanisms to support this sector. In addition, it must be noted that the vision 2020 strategy has

made it a priority to promote rural tourism, which contains great material and immaterial wealth., because this branch can play a fundamental role as an alternative activity to the overexploitation of natural resources. On the other hand, this type of tourism can be more of a catalyst for transferring money from richer to poorer regions, thus improving the quality of life of the rural population. The cornerstone of Vision 2020 has been to diversify the tourism offer by giving more attention to green and sustainable tourism and thus to rural areas that contain a great natural and cultural wealth.

## II. Motivation & Methodology

### A. Motivation

The covid-19 pandemic and the emergence of new variants continue to devastate the tourism sector worldwide. UNWTO statistics showed that this booming sector in 2019 accumulated a loss of \$2 trillion in 2021 due to the 98% drop in the number of international tourists (UNWTO, 2021). Like other countries, tourism in Morocco is impacted by a 79% drop in foreign tourist arrivals in 2020 and a 72% drop in overnight stays recorded in the accommodation establishments. Similarly, foreign exchange earnings marked a loss of -54% or 36.4 billion Dirhams.

On the other hand, rural tourism has revealed its importance and resilience in the face of this health crisis, which imposes new challenges and opportunities. In this context, the UNWTO Secretary-General stressed that "this crisis is an opportunity to rethink the tourism sector and the contribution it makes

to humanity and the planet and to do better by taking the shift towards more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism." Admittedly, the consequences of the health crisis have impacted the behavior of tourists to the extent that, after the easing of restrictions, they have expressed their growing desires to travel and go to their loved ones as well as to flee the cities and get into nature. This new Trends will allow rural tourism to be one of the first sectors to regenerate rural territories.

## B. Methodology

This paper aims to highlight the difficulties that slow down the progress of rural tourism in Morocco after and before the health crisis by taking the Fez-Meknes region as a model of illustration. This region is characterized by a great natural and cultural wealth that is insufficiently exploited. To do this, the following methodology is proposed:

- Show the importance of rural tourism in contributing to economic and social development and especially its role in the phase of the health crisis.
- Raise the difficulties faced by the rural tourism offer in the Fez-Meknes region in order to participate in the fight against poverty and the preservation of the environment and make it resilient to economic and natural crises.

## I- Economic development through rural tourism

### I-1- Rural tourism and the economic take-off of the rural world

The tourism sector is a major economic sector in terms of foreign exchange flows, direct and indirect job creation and public and private investment.

This economic importance constantly challenges national and international leaders to give it more interest in structuring a tourism offer that could maximize its impact on the economic development of a nation. This economic impact stems from the diversification of the tourism offer which can take several forms: seaside tourism, green tourism, ecotourism, agritourism, rural tourism, etc.

On the occasion of World Tourism Day in 2020, the UN Secretary-General highlighted the importance of tourism as a driver of rural development, stressing that this economic sector supports millions of people and enables people who risk being left behind to find decent work and improve their living conditions.<sup>42</sup>

In the same context, the UNWTO Secretary-General

stressed that tourism has proven to play a vital role for many rural communities. He also stated that the Tourism helps rural populations maintain their unique natural and cultural heritage through conservation projects, preservation of species at risk or forgotten traditions and flavors.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, rural tourism could be a powerful vector for an economic take-off in the rural world, which generally contains a tangible and intangible heritage rich and interesting to discover. Indeed, in its statement to its General Assembly in 2020, UNWTO states that tourism could be a driver of positive change in rural areas by creating jobs and opportunities, driving economic growth and preserving culture.

As a result, rural tourism appears to be a tool par excellence to contribute to the solution of the problem of rural poverty. It serves countries to involve the poor in economic activities and to promote the conditions of economic activity and the economic growth. Similarly, tourism activities in rural areas offer greater opportunities for poverty reduction as they promote labor-intensive activities that provide employment opportunities for both women and the low-qualified people. (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2011)

The economic impacts of rural tourism on both the local population and the national economy have been conditioned by the serious commitment and indispensable support of the public authorities. Admittedly, their roles focus on the formulation of strategies and programs aiming at creating an enabling environment for private investment and on the other hand, on mobilization, as part of a participatory, local actors, such as: non-profit / Profit Organizations and the local population.

### I-2- The contribution of rural tourism to poverty reduction

Rural tourism is the practice of tourism in rural areas using local natural and cultural resources as well as involving the active participation of local populations in welcoming tourists. Thus, this tourism contributes concretely to the safeguarding of the rural, natural and cultural heritage.

Henri Groleau (1994) defined rural tourism according to five criteria such as: - tourism activity is locally initiated; - its development is controlled locally; - the

<sup>42</sup> <https://news.un.org/fr/tags/tourisme-rural>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.unwto.org/fr/news/tourisme-et-developpement-rural>

local character (nature, gastronomy, atmosphere, etc.) is valued; - rigorous local management; - Most of the economic benefits are local. It is in this way, rural tourism is an offer integrated into rural space and rural culture, inspired by authenticity, a preserved nature of local products, a spirit of discovery, a certain slowness, local control of decisions and a preponderant place of human relations within small family tourist units and village communities (Alain Laurent, 2009)

The rural world generally suffers from several difficulties that prevent the population to overcome the pitfalls of poverty and vulnerability and to participate in local development. Indeed, geographical isolation, the insufficiency or absence of a level of training or education are all factors that do not favor private initiative or the employment of rural people in tourism projects. However, rural tourism represents an opportunity for the said population by offering them the opportunities to diversify their activities related to transport, guiding, accommodation, catering and retail trade as well as to share their know-how. In addition, the promotion of tourism requires a minimum of infrastructure such as roads, electricity, drinking water, sewerage, health services...

In its annual report published in 2002, UNWTO recommended that tourism should be oriented as the primary instrument for eradicating poverty in the poorest countries, particularly the least developed countries (LDCs), by providing development and employment to people living on less than \$1 a day (p: 111). As a result, through training and mobilization of local associations within the framework of national programs and international for the promotion of rural tourism, tourism makes it possible to catch up with development (Vellas, 2013, p:19). In addition, the involvement of the poverty dimension in the programs of international organizations and local NGOs facilitates the transition from mass and luxury tourism to community-based tourism (Mourière, 2012, p:84). Moreover, in addition to the collective actions of these NGOs which participate directly or indirectly in favor of the promotion of tourism, militant tourism (Vallas, 2013) results from the responsible and direct participation of individual tourists in voluntary actions in the form of awareness and training. Their tourism spending boosts local economic activity.

Thus, rural tourism attracts the attention of international donors in order to participate in local development by providing the possibility for the local population to access sources of capital and training

cycles. Something that helps people, especially women, to earn income-generating activities directly or indirectly related to tourism. It must be noted that the contribution of rural tourism to poverty reduction can only be felt through the creation of jobs and the reduction of rural exodus, as well as through access to basic infrastructure and the reduction of illiteracy.

However, tourism in reality is a hope of poverty reduction insofar as the implementation of major projects requires enormous financial resources and a solid political will and thus, generally, States express a financial incapacity that limits the role that tourism can play in favor of the local population. Moreover, the projects undertaken, in this sense, are only pilot projects for the decoration of rural space (Vellas, 2013) and to show the commitment of the nation in the realization of the recommendations of international bodies.

### **I-3- Rural tourism and the covid-19 pandemic**

The covid-19 pandemic has tipped the world in 2020 and particularly the tourism sector which has recorded huge losses in terms of export earnings 1300 million dollars equivalent of loss of 45 to 70% of these revenues, jobs lost about 120 million posts. (ILO, 2020)

New challenges have been imposed with the covid-19 health crisis but also new opportunities (Bentaher, 2021). Indeed, this health crisis has increased the desire to travel and see loved one's day after day and the easing of travel restrictions people are asking more for travel to other regions. This has highlighted tourism nationally and internationally.

The pandemic has accelerated travel to rural areas as the booking rate in 2015 was less than 10% in 2021 (UNWTO, 2021). Hence the importance of rural tourism worldwide.

## **II- Rural tourism in Morocco: ignored and almost untapped sector!**

### **II-1- The economic weight of the rural world in Morocco**

Since its independence, Morocco has made significant efforts to develop the rural world in view of its economic and social importance. Indeed, it is characterized by a rural area that extends over 90% of the country's surface and represents 40% of the Moroccan population. Similarly, the rural world contains 43% of the country's assets and its

agricultural production

meets 65% of cereal needs, 96% of milk needs and 100% of poultry needs (EESC, 2017). As a result, the agricultural sector became the spearhead of the Kingdom's economic policy choices.

However, progress in terms of investment and equipment remains insufficient, particularly in terms of water, access to basic services and infrastructure, and the economic benefits of agricultural strategies remain mixed in view of the needs of the rural population and the requirements of decent living conditions. Admittedly, the rural world in Morocco is marked by a worrying economic backwardness insofar as it registers almost 85.4% of people living in rural areas suffer from multidimensional poverty, about 54% of areas are isolated and an illiteracy rate of around 47.5% (HCP, 2014). In terms of infrastructure, rural areas have a deficit in health services 52% of rural people do not have a RAMED card and more than 60% of them do not have medical coverage or AMO. In addition, 1.3 million people do not have electricity and 3.5 million of them do not have access to drinking water (EESC, 2017). Thus, it must be noted that these results contribute to the accentuation of the rural exodus and the phenomena of crime and slums in urban areas.

No one can ignore the nodal role that Moroccan agriculture plays in terms of production and employment through its economic weight 12% of GDP and its contribution to the national job market 38% and around 74% of the rural working population (DEFP, 2019) but the economic and social problems that arise from agricultural policy choices call for political decision-makers to look at other complementary mechanisms allowing, a secondly, to deal with the issue of the instability of the rural population and, on the other hand, to put an end to social inequalities and the concentration of wealth of a minority of this population. Therefore, it should be noted that rural tourism is considered one of the economic strategies contributing to

the development of the rural world and particularly to the promotion and diversification of economic activities of the local population (UNWTO, 2020)

This economic importance of rural tourism is well and truly recognized by Morocco in its tourism strategies insofar as the assets and tourism potential in rural areas are attractive but untapped and unorganized. The development of rural tourism will allow a rural

population based on agriculture to have additional incomes, decent jobs and a great diversification of the rural economy.

## II-2- Tourism strategies: "Vision 2010" and "Vision 2020"

As part of the free trade agreement concluded between Morocco and the United States in 2002 and according to a survey funded by USAID among tourists visiting the Kingdom each year and visiting seaside resorts or imperial cities and which shows that two out of three tourists would like to spend more time in rural areas, , Morocco has signed an agreement with USAID to develop a rural tourism promotion (RTP) program to help Morocco contribute to the ambitious goal of attracting 10 million tourists by 2010. This signature expressed Morocco's serious commitment to developing tourism in rural areas. As a result, it embarked on the 2010 strategy by implementing a new approach for this tourism under the brand "Pays d'Accueil Touristique (PAT)". Its purpose was to offer equitable benefits and to conserve the natural and cultural heritage. It is a tourist product aimed at making known the natural and heritage wealth of which the Moroccan rural world contains.

### a- Tourism Strategy: "Vision 2010"

The 2010 vision aimed to achieve a record of 100,000 tourists in 2010 and it aims to catch up with rural tourism because of the priority given to the basic product of the Moroccan destination namely, seaside tourism on the one hand, and formalize and supervise the spontaneous initiatives of the local population in terms of welcoming foreign tourists wishing to discover the hinterland<sup>44</sup> (Berriane, 2016). The flagship product of this PAT vision has been limited to enriching the seaside tourism offer by promoting tourism activities in the different regions of the country. In this sense, the supervising ministry has envisaged the achievement of three objectives, namely, to create wealth for the local population. In consultation and participation with local stakeholders, complete the seaside tourism development project and rebalance regional tourism development.

This experience, borrowed from the experience of the PATs in France in 1976, was, however, remarkably

<sup>44</sup> Hinterland: covers all rural areas classified as marginal and vulnerable. These are the spaces and societies that did not lend themselves well to the implementation of agricultural modernization policies, did not know or could not capitalize on the major transformations of the productivism economy and are therefore often considered backward and immobile.

lacking in political will. Indeed, out of 24 PAT only 5 PAT had the chance to see the light of the day, it is PAT of Chefchaouen, Ifran, Imouzzer des Ida Outanane, Zagora and Ouarzazate. This failure to promote rural tourism in the various target regions are mainly due to the virtual absence of the effective involvement of the local population and local actors during the development of the rural tourism development program and particularly the design of the PAT.

As a result, the mixed results of the PAT have prompted the supervising ministry to replace it with another program called "Qariaté" as part of a new tourism strategy "Vision 2020".

#### **b- Tourism Strategy: "Vision 2020"**

Strategy 2020 aimed to complete the unfinished investments of Vision 2010 and develop new products under a more integrated approach to spatial planning. The third axis of this strategy entitled: "Green-eco-sustainable development" focuses on rural tourism under a new brand "nature offer" which finds its strength in a model composed of three pillars, namely, growth supported, responsible management of the environment and respect for socio-cultural authenticity.

However, it is obvious to note the absence of a strategy dedicated to the promotion of rural tourism in the 12 regions of the Kingdom. The table below shows this observation:

**Table.1: Distribution of tourist hotel establishments according to the regions of Morocco**

*Source: author's calculation, 2018 data*

#### **II-3- The impact of the pandemic on tourism in Morocco**

This pandemic caused a halt in tourism activity in Morocco and it generated between 2020 and 2022 a loss of 138 billion dirhams. Foreign tourist arrivals fell by -79% in 2020 and overnight stays recorded at classified accommodation establishments fell by 72%. In addition, travel revenues have expected a loss of - 54% or 36.5 billion dirhams (Ministry of Tourism, 2021).

#### **III.The rural tourism offer in the Fez-Meknes region: diagnosis and prospects**

##### **III .1. Presentation of the Fes Meknes region**

The Fez-Meknes region is a region made up of seven

Region / EH in rural area	Inn	Camp sites	Host farms	Gîte	Total des EH	% E.H en rural areas	Number of rural communes
Tanger-Tétouan-Asila	3	1	0	31	320	10.93	149
Oriental	1	0	0	6	113	6.19	147
Fès-Meknès	11	4	0	77	402	22.88	194
Rabat-Salé-Kenitra	0	1	0	2	96	3.125	114
Béni-Mellal-Khénifra	7	0	1	76	167	50.29	164
Casa blanca-Settat	2	1	1	3	214	3.27	153
Marrakech-Safi	18	6	27	46	1975	4.91	251
Drâa-Tafilalet	78	6	27	46	381	4.91	109
Souss-Massa	11	8	4	37	247	24.29	175
Guelmim-Oued Noun	5	3	0	15	65	35.38	53
Laâyoune-Sakia El Hamra	1	1	0	0	47	4.25	20
Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab	0	0	0	0	28	0	13

provinces (Taza, Taounate, Boulmane, Ifran, Elhajeb, Moulay Yaakoub and Sefrou) and two prefectures namely, Meknes and Fez which represents the capital

of the region. Its position in the center-north of Morocco, the region is a passage of both human and economic movements.

**Fig.1: Fez-Meknes region with its seven provinces and two prefectures**



*Source: Morocco of the regions 2018, HCP*

### III-2- The Tourist Assets of the RFM

#### a- Road infrastructure of the RFM

The FM region has a road network classified 7620km including 202 km motorway, 74 km expressways and the railway spreads over 200 km. It contains a single civilian airport located in the city of Fez (see map n°2 below).

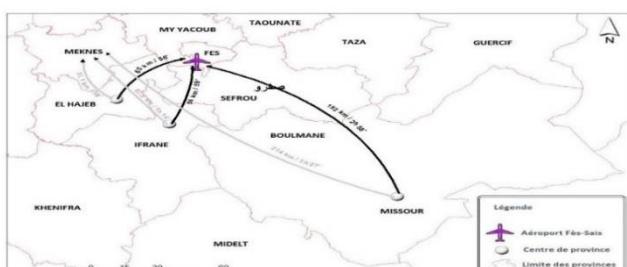
**Fig.2: Presence of a single airport in the city of Fés**

*Source: Diagnostic-RFM Report, 2019*

In addition, it is characterized by a large predominance of provincial roads which represent 55% of the roads in the region and is followed by national roads 16%. Whereas classified roads and regional roads represent successively 14% and 13% as well as 2% of these roads correspond to motorways<sup>45</sup>.

#### b- The tourist characteristics of the Fez-Meknes region

Internationally, the two cities Fez and Meknes are known for cultural tourism thanks to their historical and cultural heritage. Other provinces that contain an



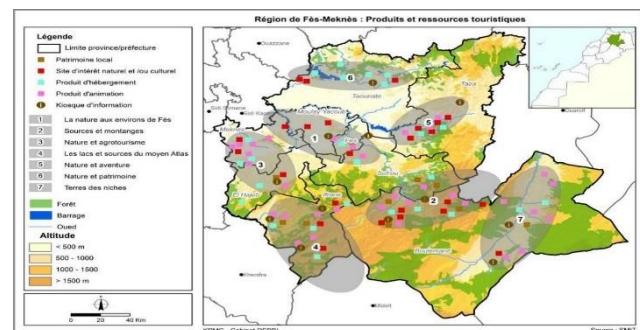
abundance of natural resources (thermal stations,

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.equipement.gov.ma>

forests, waterfalls, mountains,) reason or otherwise, untapped and ignored.

It should be noted that the FM region is bounded to the north by the hills at the foot of the Rif and characterized by the Middle Atlas Mountains and the high hills of the Missour as well as the plains of Saïss<sup>46</sup>. The tourist map below shows the tourist wealth of the Fez-Meknes region at the level of these different territories. Certainly, it shows the tourist clear positioning and the geographical location and accessibility of the Territory. This one is characterized by a diversity and contrasts of sites and landscapes and niche areas with high added value: hydrotherapy, health and well-being, agritourism, hunting....

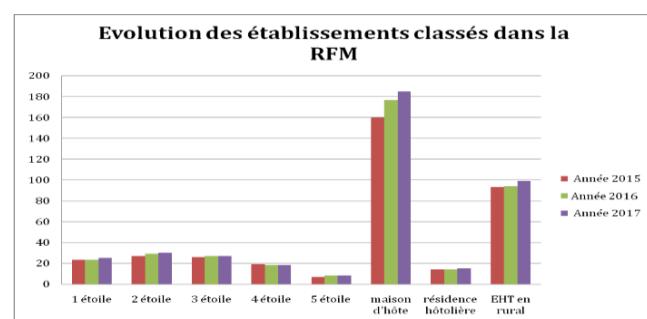
**Fig.3: the tourist characteristics of the RFM**



*Source: Moroccan tourism company*

### III-3-The tourism offer in the rural world of the RFM

**Fig.4: Evolution of the numbers of classified EHTs between 2015 and 2017**



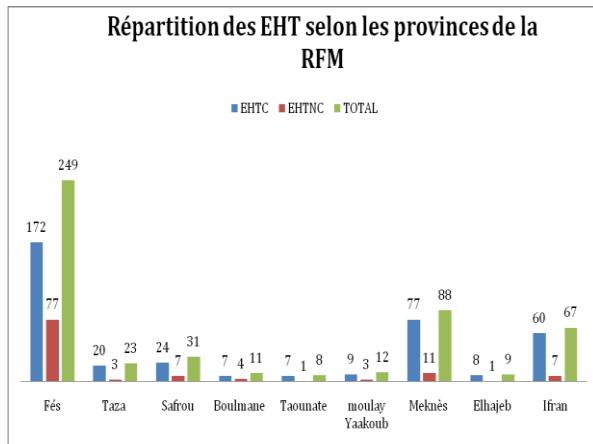
*Source: graphic made by the author*

According to this graph, it appears that the number of classified EHTs increased slightly between 2015 and 2017 and it is noticeable that guest houses located in urban areas monopolize the significant share of the number of E. coli. H.T at the RFM level. Similarly, it should be noted that these EHTs are distributed, as

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.hcp.ma/file/104402>

shown in the graph below, over three cities, namely, Fez, Meknes and Ifran.

**Fig. 5: Distribution of EHT by RFM provinces**



**Sources: graphic made by the author, 2020 data**

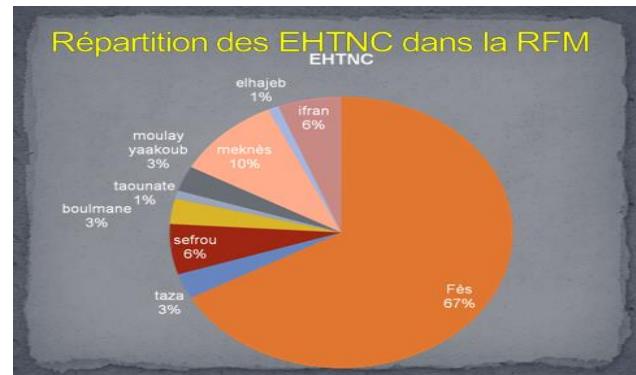
Indeed, the analysis of graph n°3 makes it possible to deduce that the two prefectures Fez and Meknes as well as the province of Ifrane are marked by a predominance of classified and unclassified EHTs. This one seems to be strengthening since the two prefectures have an international tourist vocation thanks to their cultural and historical heritage and the province of Ifrane had a particular political and economic attention because of its natural assets against the six provinces of the region that contain important natural, cultural and historical resources. This territorial distribution of EHT is indeed shown in the following two graphs:

**Fig.6 : Distribution of EHt by RFM provinces**



**Source: graphic made by the author, 2020 data**

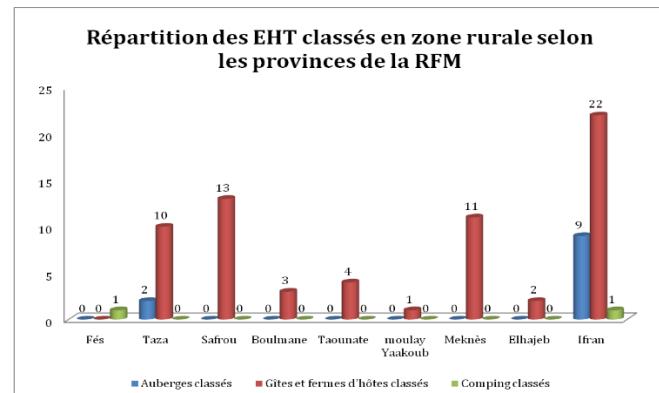
**Fig7: Distribution of NHTs by RFM provinces**



**Sources: graphic made by the author, 2020 data**

The analysis of graph n°4 shows that rural tourism in the Fez-Meknes region is almost inactive. Indeed, its activities are concentrated in the province of Ifrane, which includes the majority of EHTs located in rural areas. In addition, the number of guides to natural areas represents 31 at the level of the region, 16 of which operate at the level of the province of Ifrane, 11 at the level of Fez and 4 on the territory of Taza (DRTF, 2021)

**Fig.8: Distribution of the number of EHT classified in rural areas by RFM provinces**

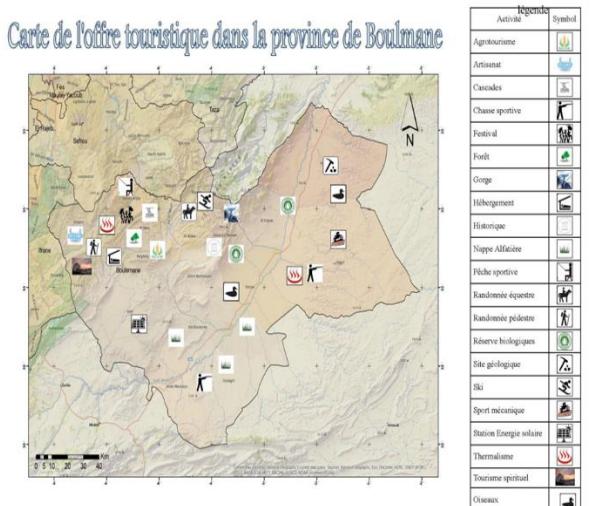


**Source graphic made by the author, 2020 data**

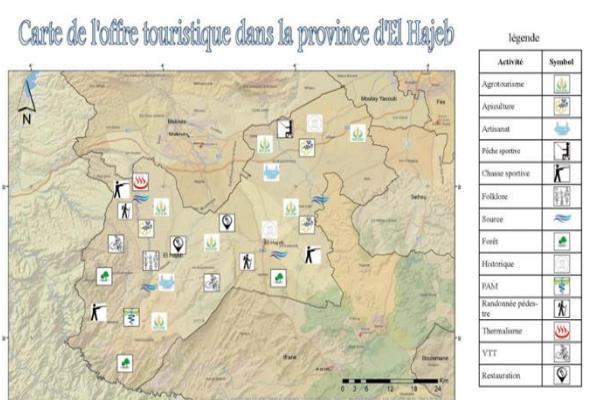
On the other hand, the three provinces: Boulemane, Ifrane and El Hajeb, for example, are rich in their natural and cultural resources and contain only three tourist facilities located in rural areas. The following tourist maps show the natural and cultural wealth:



**Source: diagnostic report, RFM, 2108**



**Source: diagnostic report, RFM, 2108**



**Source: diagnostic report, RFM, 2108**

### III-4- The negative effects of the covid-19 health crisis on tourism activity

Before the health crisis, the tourism offer in the FM Region was marked by low competitiveness and the absence of product diversification as well as the scarcity of road signs and site interpretation. However, the crisis has ceased the activity of all accommodation establishments with the exception of hotels being made available to the medical profession and confined patients as well as foreign tourists who have not been able to reach their countries.

Between 2019 and 2020, tourist arrivals and overnight stays recorded a sharp drop successively of -72% and 71% and hotels suffered this loss of -81%. However, local tourism has been able to resist by its internal flows despite travel restrictions. Tourist arrivals at bed and breakfasts showed a decrease of 25% in contrast to guest houses (-79%) (DRTF, 2021)

However, rural tourism, during and after this pandemic, could play a resilience factor. Indeed, the psychic effects of it on people have propelled the desire to travel and the intention to go to other places in search of new experiences. The rural world allows tourists to meet their needs for outdoor escape and disconnect.

### Conclusion

To conclude, rural tourism is an economic opportunity missed by Morocco which is characterized by unprecedented natural, cultural and historical assets. In these tourism strategies, it is obvious to note that it has given an important place to seaside tourism and has thus participated in the widening of territorial inequalities.

The covid-19 health crisis has confirmed the failures of its strategies that have preferred foreign tourists by ignoring domestic demand and rural destination. The RFM is a good illustration of this oversight and which spares an extraordinary wealth because of its geographical position and its cultural and historical heritage.

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