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Territorial Intelligence as a Lever for Reducing Regional Disparities in Algeria: A Territorial Analysis of Bejaia through the Location of Agri-Food Industries

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Abstract :
In region suffering from an imbalance in development, territorial intelligence is a strategic solution based on cooperation, the mobilisation of local resources and proactive governance. It promotes the flow of information and the integration of economic and institutional actors. This article examines the case of the wilaya of Bejaia, a major agri-food hub in Algeria in the, analysing the link between firm location and the practice of territorial intelligence based on a questionnaire sent to firms and interview with local actors. The results highlight the importance of a concerted territorial strategy to enhance attractiveness and reduce regional disparities.
Keywords: Territorial intelligence, firm location, agri-food, governance, territorial strategy.
Jel Classification Codes:

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Introduction:

In Algeria, regional disparities persist, despite the government's significant efforts to promote territorial rebalancing. Development remains concentrated in the major cities of the north, with are home to 90% of the population on just 12% of the country's territory (Kateb.K, 2003). Meanwhile, the high lands in the south, although rich in strategic resources-notably hydrocarbons in the south, which account for 93-95% of exports (Algeria Economic Report, 2019 and 2020)-suffer from a lack of infrastructures and dependence on the state.(Yousfi.B, 2017).

As regards the rural regions of the north, since the late 1990s the state has pursued a development strategy based on the Rural Policy, implemented through local integrate rural development projects (PPDRI). These programmes aim for inclusive development. However, the centralisation still presenting development projects maintains the top-down approach (Chenoune.O, Pecqueur.B, & Djenane.A, 2017).

Territorial intelligence (TI) could be a significant asset for commune officials in monitoring their interaction with local actors during the preparation of the communal action plan (Bouaoulou.M & Nmili.M, 2021).

Territorial rebalancing in Algeria requires improving the attractiveness of marginalised regions to attract and retain investment whilst reducing territorial inequality. However, the location of businesses faces challenges relating to industrial land, characterized by a lack of land, legal instability and administrative mismanagement.

This reality harms the attractiveness of the territory and the business climate in Algeria: "the issue of industrial land remains a critical bottleneck for promoting investment, as highlighted by numerous national or foreign developers interested in our country" (Khoadjia.S.H, 2016)

Faced with these challenges, territorial intelligence (TI) emerges as a promising tool for more equitable development. This article examines its role in the distribution of agri-food enterprises, analysing the case of Bejaia province, ***where a concentration of activities raises the question: does it result from a bottom-up dynamic or a deliberate strategy?*** The study also evaluates the potential of TI to reduce socioeconomic disparities and proposes an approach adapted to marginalised territories. Three hypotheses structure this research:

H1: A convergence between planning policies and TI can favor territorial rebalancing.

H2: TI constitutes a suitable response to the territorial marginalisation of enterprises.

H3: Current location determinants explain the unequal distribution of agri-food industries (AFI) across the Bejaia territory.

The adopted methodology combines a literature review, a questionnaire survey, and semi-structured interviews with local actors. The article is structured in four parts: a theoretical framework, a presentation of the methodology, the analysis of results, and a conclusive discussion. The theoretical framework summarises the emergence, definition, pillars, and approaches of TI.

1- Literature Review:

1.1. From Economic Intelligence to Territorial Intelligence

Economic intelligence (EI), initially conceived as a competitiveness tool for enterprises and states, relies on the collection and strategic exploitation of information (Commissariat Général du Plan, 1994). Perceived as economic patriotism (Pelissier.M & Pybourdin.I, L'intelligence territoriale, 2009), it aims to anticipate market changes and secure competitive advantages. However, this approach, centered on the individual performance of economic actors, has evolved towards a more collaborative logic, integrating the territory as a relevant scale for collective action. This transition gave rise to territorial intelligence (TI), which expands the field of EI by integrating social, institutional, and environmental dimensions (Coussi.O, 2022).

TI is distinguished from EI by its objectives and methods: where EI prioritises competitiveness and strategic monitoring, TI promotes cooperation, co-construction, and shared governance (Benichou.A, Kharbach.O, & Daoudi.L.Youssoufi.H, 2023).

1.2. Territorial Intelligence: a concept in the making

TI is a recent concept with multiple meanings and an unstable definition, situated at the crossroads of various disciplines.(Pelissier.M & Pybourdin.I, 2009). First appearing in 1990, its definition remains imprecise and difficult to pin down (Ikhmim.s, Elmouaddine.H, & Alij.N, 2022). From the 2000s onwards, Bertacchini, Girardo, and Pelissier highlighted the role of TI in building competitive, sustainable and balanced territories, paving the way for a divergence of approaches and the creation of an international TI network.

Today, TI emerges as a response to the challenges of changing territories, combining collective innovation and adaptation to local issues (Redondo-Toronjo.D, 2007).

1.3. Approaches to Territorial Intelligence

(Pelissier.M & Pybourdin.I, 2009) identifies two approaches to TI : the top-down approach, stemming from public policy and closely related to economic intelligence applies to territories (Goria.S, 2016), which focuses on competitiveness and attractiveness ; and the bottom-up approach, rooted in local dynamics, which emphasises endogenous resources and the role of territorial actors.

Integrating these two perspectives allows for a more nuanced understanding of regional challenges; by aligning national strategic objectives with locally expressed needs, they converge towards the same goals: the competitiveness and attractiveness of regions and are better served by being combined in a complementary approach (Coussi.O, 2022).

1.4. The determinants of successful TI implementation

The success of TI practice depends first and foremost on the use of new information and communication technologies, which form its essential infrastructure (Pascaru.M, 2006), the GIS and territorial information systems facilitate the management and sharing of information between actors as exemplified by the Catalyse initiative in Europe,yet their limited uptake acts as a barrier to territorial development, as seen in the Tunisian case (Meyer.V, Haddad.M, Faillon.B M., & Tlig.F, 2018).

Furthermore, it depends on its integration into a sustainable development approach that incorporates economic, social and environmental dimensions and promotes territorial capital (Bertacchini, 2004, Lahrach, Helmi & EL Makhad, 2020 et Bakour

& Ouassou, 2024), which requires participatory management and the balanced management of resources.

Finally, the success of TI rests on the consolidation of territorial identity, underpinned by the actor's attachment to their territory and the responsibility of those actively participating in territorial development, this daily collaboration between actors stems from their geographical proximity. (Benichou.A, Kharbach.O, & Daoudi.L.Youssoufi.H, 2023) In (Maurel, 2012). Consequently, attachment to the region, solidarity and the sharing of common values are factors in the success of a territorial intelligence (BenSlymen.S, 2016).

2 - Methodological Approach:

This study falls within applied research with exploratory and explanatory aims. It relies on a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative tools (questionnaires) and qualitative tools (semi-structured interviews), to better understand the location logics of agri-food enterprises and the potential of territorial intelligence in Bejaia province. The research logic is hypothetico-deductive. It starts from theoretical observations on territorial imbalances and the contributions of territorial intelligence to test three operational hypotheses through the empirical analysis of the Bejaia case. This approach allows for crossing actor perceptions with objective data on local dynamics. The survey aims to:

- Identify the spatial and non-spatial determinants of AFI location;
- Evaluate the quality of interactions between enterprises and other territorial actors;
- Identify the territorial governance (consultation, coordination, co-construction) and understand the stakeholders involved in the choice of land for investment at the local level;
- Assess the level of maturity or initiation of a territorial intelligence on the ground.

2.1. Data Collection Tools

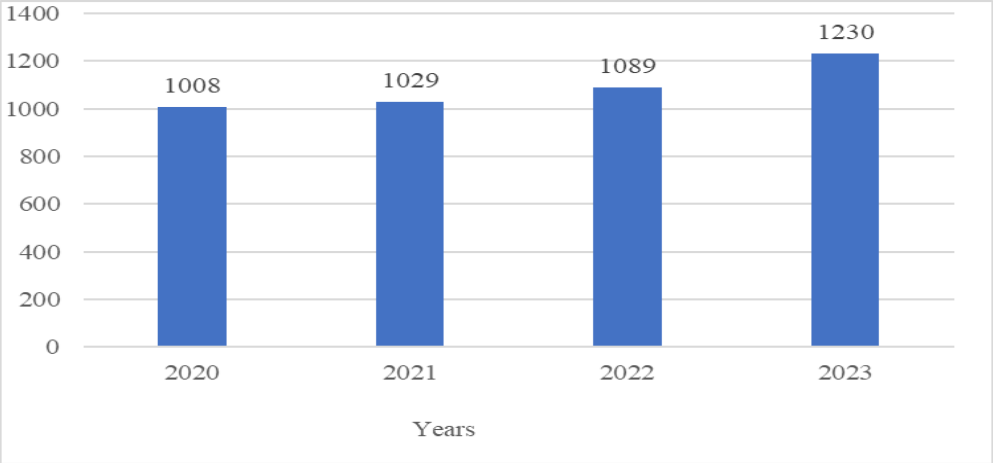
Two methodological tools are used: a structured questionnaire was sent to agri-food industry enterprises in the wilaya of Bejaia. Organised around five themes: the enterprise's profile, location criteria, inter- enterprises relations, links with other territorial actors (local authorities, administration,etc.) and its links with research centres and the university.

Asemi-structured interview guide was sent to five different local actors : local authoroties, representatives of all decentralised state departments (involved in territorial development and the selection of sites for investment),heads of semi-public bodies(chamber of commerce), and representatives of civil society organisations :civil society organisations, the University of Bejaia, a training centre specialised in agri-food, business creation support schemes (NESDA, ANGEM), and the ANEM as a tool for intermediation between labor supply and demand, and the six banks for two different statuses to evaluate their role in local development and provide an overview of the existence of a territorial strategy focused on TI and understand territorial governance in the issue of land choice for investment.

2.2. Sampling

The choice of enterprises was made in a reasoned manner, targeting the flourishing sector of the provincial territory: the agri-food industry. In Fig. 1, an increase in the number of SMEs created from 2020 to 2023 is observed, indicating strong entrepreneurial dynamics, creating 4,449 jobs in the sector in 2023. This represents 5.47% of the total jobs (81,221) created by SMEs in various sectors, thus occupying sixth place in terms of total jobs created at the provincial level.

Figure1. Evolution in the number of agri-food industry SMEs in Bejaia province



Source: Authors' own work based on data from the Directorate of Industry, Bejaia

Our survey spanned a one-year period from 15 April 2024 to 15 April 2025. We targeted 40 AFI enterprises of different sizes, different communes, and different geographical zones (industrial zones, activity zones, outside zones) via our questionnaire to trace any potential collaboration or collective intelligence arising from geographical proximity in this sector. Unfortunately, out of the 40 AFI enterprises we contacted, we only received 27 usable questionnaires.

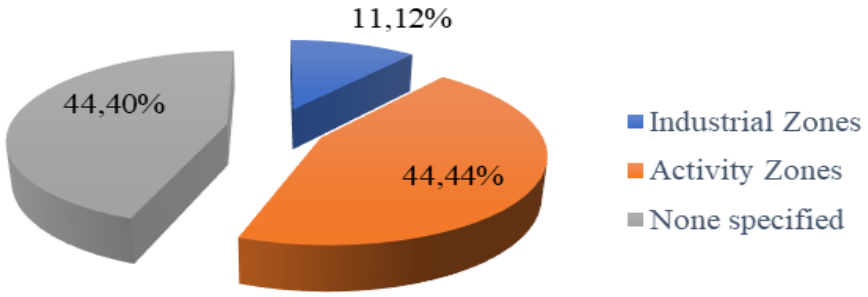
The actors involved in the semi-structured interviews were all actors directly concerned with the issue of land choice (members of the land selection and validation commission: elected officials, DDE) to evaluate the existence of territorial intelligence and territorial governance in enterprise location, and all actors involved in territorial development to trace a potential TI for local development.

3-Analysis of Results:

3.1. Presentation of the Enterprises in Our Sample

Our sample consists of 27 AFI enterprises, the majority (14) of which is Limited Liability Companies (SARL) as presented in Fig. 2. This legal status is the most suitable for SMEs; 20 out of 27 enterprises in our sample have this status.

Figure 2. Location of enterprises in our sample by zone type



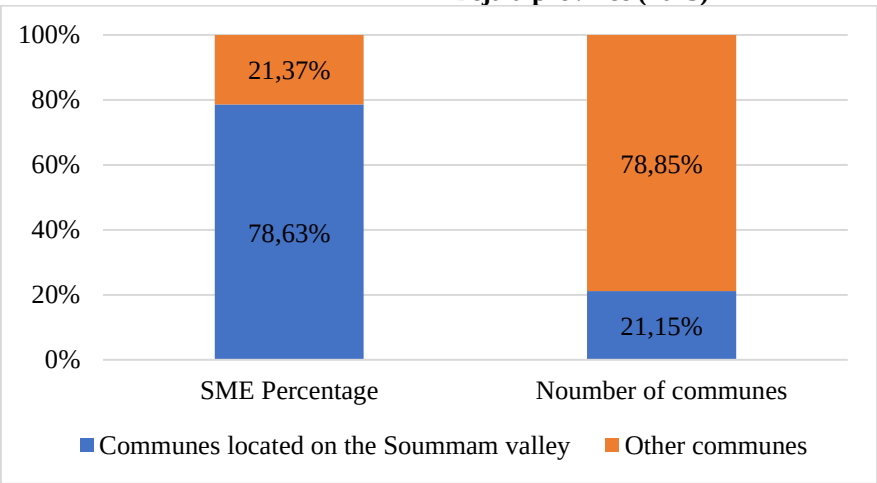
Source: Authors' own work based on survey results

The enterprises in our survey are located in different communes (11 communes out of 52 in the province), mainly Akbou, which alone accounts for 44.44%. Other communes include Bejaia, Oued Ghir, IghzerAameqran, Tazmalt, Timezrit, Amizour, Semaoun, Ighrem, Sidi-Aïch, and Ighil-Ali. 55.55% of our sample is located in Activity Zones (AZ) and Industrial Zones (IZ).

3.2. The Unequal Distribution of Enterprises Across the Territory of Bejaia Province

More than 3/4 of SMEs are located in 21.15% of the communes situated on the two banks of the Soummam Valley, while less than 1/4 of enterprises are located in 78.63% of the communes. This location reflects an unequal distribution of activities across the provincial territory. This reality is identical for AFIs. Indeed, Fig 3 demonstrates the unequal distribution of SMEs across the territory of Bejaia province.

Figure 3. Distribution of SMEs across the territory of Bejaia province (2023)



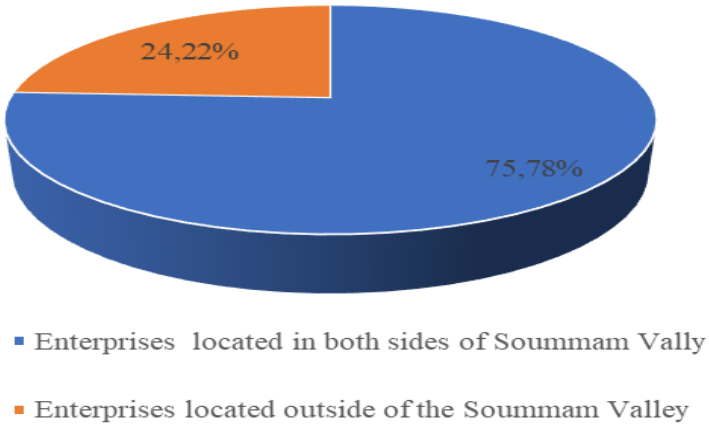
Source: Authors' own work based on survey results

3.3. Location of Agri-Food Enterprises

In 2023, more than 3/4 of the most important agri-food enterprises are located on the two banks of the Soummam Valley, compared to less than 1/4 of enterprises located outside the Soummam Valley as pictured in Fig 4.

What are the determining factors for this inequality in the distribution of enterprises in general and AFIs in particular?

Figure 4. Location of the 124 most important agri-food industry enterprises in Bejaia

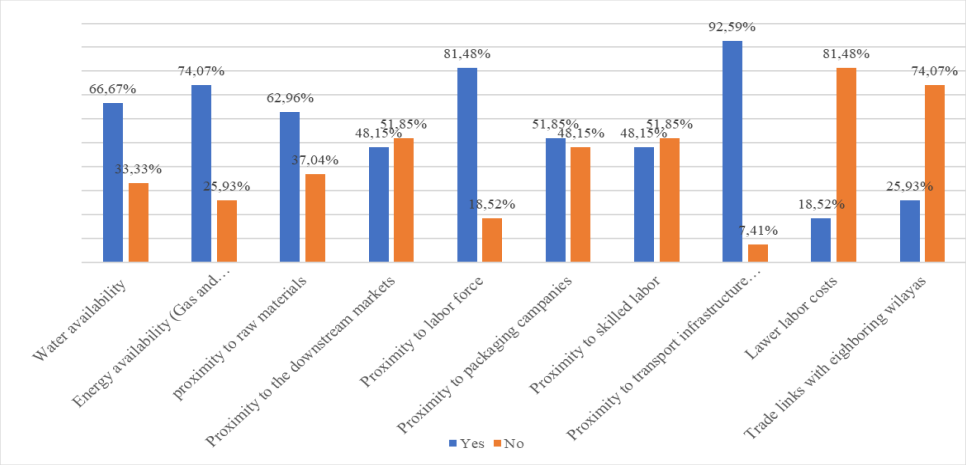


Source: Figure created by the authors based on data from the Directorate of Industry, 2023.

3.4. Location Factors for AFIs in Bejaia Province

The analysis of responses regarding the location factors of AFIs allowed us to classify the determinants of AFI location as summarised in Figure 5.

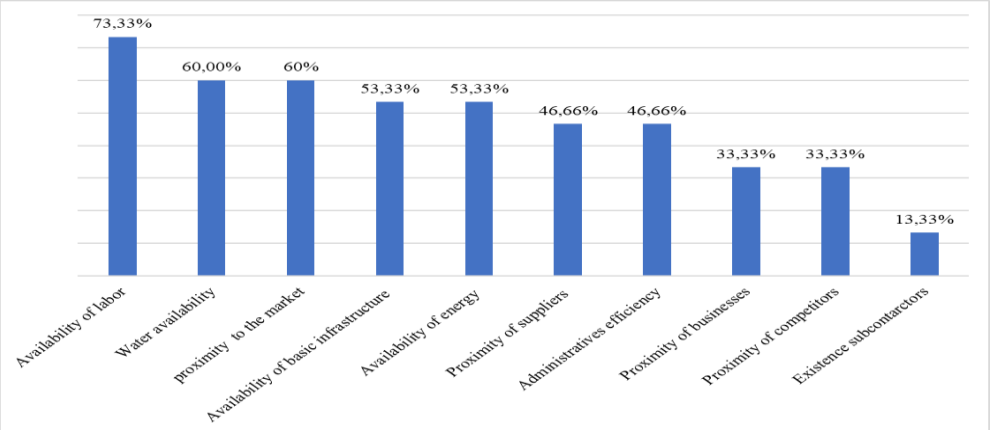
Figure 5. Perception of the importance of location factors by surveyed enterprises



Source: Authors' own work based on survey results

We note that the location of the enterprises in our survey depends on several factors, namely: water availability, energy, raw materials, labor, qualified labor, lower labor costs, proximity to the market (clients) and packaging manufacturing enterprises, proximity to transport infrastructure, and commercial links with nearby provinces. However, proximity to transport infrastructure, mainly the dense road network, the East-West highway, airport, and port that the province possesses, constitutes the most determining factor. For the location factors of enterprises located in developed zones (AZ/IZ), they are summarised in Fig 6.

Figure 6. Perception of the importance of location factors for enterprises located in IZs and AZs



Source: Authors' own work based on survey results

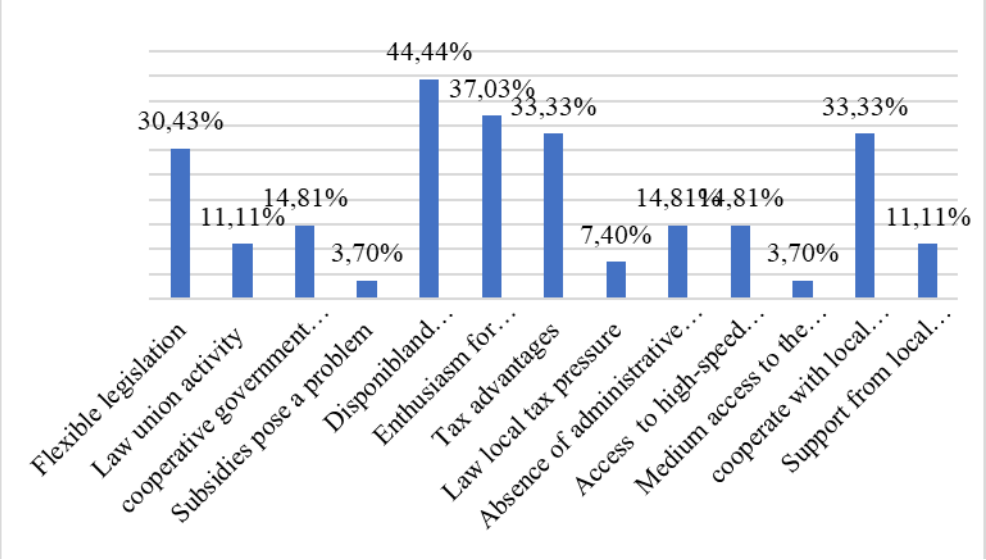
The location factors for AFIs located in developed zones are almost identical to those for enterprises outside zones, finding that proximity to labor, water, basic infrastructure, energy availability, and market proximity are more determining for

more than half of the AFI enterprises in their location choice. Compared to factors such as proximity to suppliers, administrative efficiency, proximity to competitors, subcontractors, and enterprises in the same branch, which present less determining factors in AFI location. This indicates that clustering within AZs or IZs within a framework of organization for particular and regional interest is not yet developed.

3.5. The Business Climate is a Factor of Attractiveness

In addition to the location factors already cited, other determining factors of the business climate play a major role in territorial attractiveness. Figure 7 summarises an assessment of the business climate by the enterprises, where investment land remains a major concern for enterprises.

Figure 7. Perception of the importance of business climate factors by enterprises



Source: Authors' own work based on survey results

3.6. Links Between Enterprises in the Same IZ or AZ

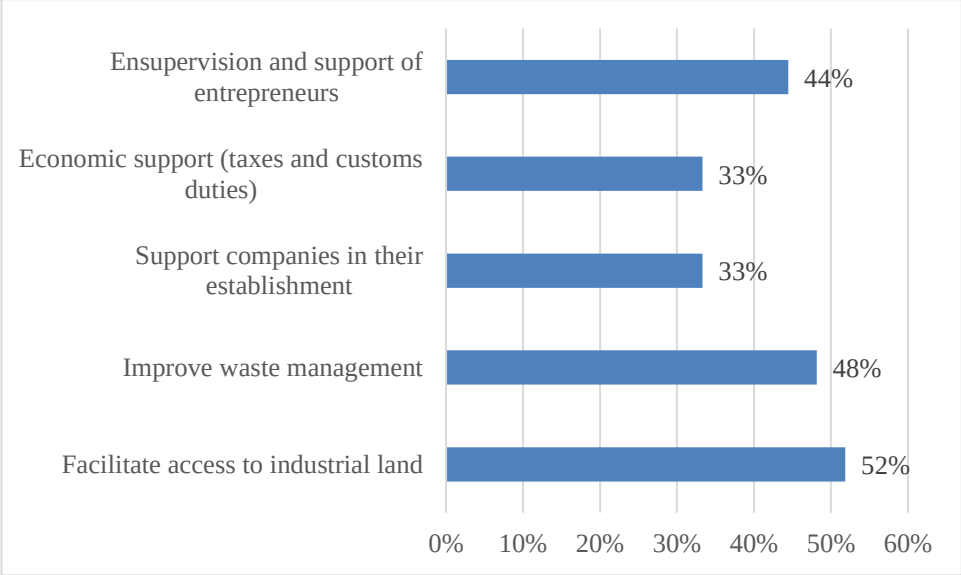
The non-existence of common projects and the low share of partnership between enterprises in the same zone limit the link between enterprises to subcontracting, which does not exceed 20%, despite the good link characterising inter-company relations confirmed by 33.33% of enterprises. This subcontracting link explains the clustering of enterprises around others (agglomeration or industrial cluster effect) without this dynamic going further to create a particular and ambitious dynamism. For example, the Taharracht Activity Zone (Akbou), where the study on the location factors of enterprises in this zone is determined by the proximity of other enterprises (agglomeration economy) as an attraction factor, as well as the presence of service (basic) infrastructure that plays a major role in the choice of location (Hamitouche.S & Souman.M.O, 2024), thus creating a premise of TI.

3.7. The Absence of a Formal Framework for Territorial Development cooperation

The commune of Akbou has a particular dynamism in terms of links between SMEs, which tend to cooperate informally, sharing their resources and information. This cooperation strengthens their competitiveness and resilience in the face of market challenges. However, the absence of a formal structure limits the scope and impact of these interactions on territorial development (Ziane.L & Boukrif.M, 2024). The absence of practical involvement for territorial development limits the collective assumption of enterprise concerns.

The major concerns of enterprises in terms of attractiveness factors are summarized in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Priority Support Measures According to Enterprises



Source: Authors' own work based on survey results.

Investment land remains a major concern for enterprises wishing to expand or relocate.

3.8. University-Enterprise: What Actor Synergy for Territorial Development?

Only 37%of enterprises have a research and innovation department, and no formal collaboration with universities has been identified; interaction to hosting interns and attending trade fairs. This situation hinders the creation of effective synergy between research and the region, which is essential for ensuring successful regional development.

3.9. TI, A State of Play and Contribution to Enterprise Location and Territorial Rebalancing.

Industrial land in Algeria is characterized by legal and institutional instability linked to the multiplicity of legislation and management bodies, reflecting a complex administrative governance structure(Khoadjia.S.H, 2016). Law N° 22-18 du 24 July 2022 on investment introduced a majorreform through the creation of Algerian Investment Promotion Agency (AAPI), now the sole body responsible for allocating serviced land plots via a centralized and digitilised procedure. In the wilaya of Bejaia, the creation of new business parks, industrial estates and microbusiness parks reflects a public policy effort to achieve territorial rebalancing, aimed at expanding industrial land and revitalising under-industrialised municipalities. However, the survey highlights the persistence of a centralized approach, a lack of territorial information at the local level and the absence of TI tools, which limits the alignment between investment decisions and territorial specificities, thereby hindering territorial rebalancing policies.

3.10. Example of Successful Territorial Intelligence: Cluster Boisson Algerie

In Bejaia, the beverage sector is an example of successful territorial intelligence; a cluster has formed around this activity integrating the entire value chain. Based on proximity and cooperation, this cluster promotes the pooling of resources and the sharing of information, thereby strengthening collective competitiveness and facilitating the shift from a logic of competition to one of coopetition.

Conclusion:

In Algeria, TI is included in the territorial strategy without being formal or endowed with appropriate tools. An effort is shown for its implementation in future territorial planning projects. The management of investment land is done through centralised governance, limiting the participatory approach of citizens in territorial development. The location of AFIs in Bejaia province is explained mainly by location factors (availability of basic infrastructure, proximity to labor and market); this is a top-down TI. Other dynamic locations emerging (such as agri-food clusters) are explained by the clustering of subcontracting enterprises around main enterprises, forming a bottom-up type of TI. Far from being highly advanced, it allows for a particular dynamism in the region in terms of jobs created and added value. The success of this type of strategy is born from Kabyle culture based on solidarity and attachment to its values. Better structuring, associated with adapted tools and inclusive governance, could ensure territorial rebalancing of marginalised regions through more just and sustainable territorial development.

On theoretical level, most studies on territorial intelligence focus on Europe and North America, while very little research has been conducted in Algeria. This makes it more difficult to adapt existing models.

On a practical level, the study faces complexity related to the diversity of actors, restricted access to strategic information, and the absence of formalised indicators to evaluate territorial intelligence.

The evaluation of territorial intelligence requires adapted tools and indicators, access to territorial information, structured collaboration between actors, and strengthening territorial governance.

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