

# Youth-driven action, participatory planning, and the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals in Tunisian cities

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By Zeineb Sellami

Hiba Bou Akar, Advisor  
Youssef Cherif, Reader

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to evaluate how youth-driven initiatives and participatory planning within municipalities affect the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 at the grassroots, municipal, and national levels. The research focuses on post-revolution Tunisia and the changes that have occurred since the Arab Spring transformed the MENA region

in 2011. It begins by exploring the SDGs as global frameworks, where attainment is measured at the national level but whose goals are prescribed in more localized contexts, with cities playing a key role. The study then questions the effectiveness of post-revolution decentralization policies on municipal projects and participatory mechanisms. Finally, this thesis explores the advent of multiplying youth-driven grassroots initiatives that, deliberately or unknowingly, align with global sustainability goals.

In addition to archival research on the SDGs and Tunisian municipal structures, the research employs semi-structured interviews allowing for a more in-depth view of the situation at the local level. Interviewees include experts from the UNDP, private sector, international organizations, municipal decision-makers, and youth leaders that spearhead initiatives across their neighborhoods. The aim is to shed light on the rarely discussed role of youth at the intersection of local and global planning frameworks through this Tunisian case-study. Where most research studies focus on a single one of the aforementioned topics, this thesis brings together three levels of inquiry: the global, the national, and the local to shed light onto the complex dynamics that spur and determine planning outcomes in Tunisia's post-revolutionary context.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFD	International Development Center for the Innovative Local Governance <i>From French: Le Centre International de Développement pour la Gouvernance Locale</i>
ASM	National Federation of Tunisian Cities <i>From French: Fédération National des Villes Tunisiennes</i>
CILG FNVT GIZ	German Agency of International Cooperation <i>From German: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit International Funding Institution</i>
IFI	National Heritage Institute <i>From French: Institut National du Patrimoine</i>
INP	National Institute of Statistics, Tunisia <i>From French: Institut National de la Statistique</i>
INS	Ministry of Foreign Affairs <i>From French: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères</i>
MAE	Millenium Development Goals
MDG MDICI	Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation <i>From French: Ministère de Développement, de l'Investissement et de la Coopération Internationale</i>
	Middle East and North Africa
	French Development Agency <i>From French: Agence Française de Développement</i>
	Association for the Preservation of the Medina <i>From French: Association de la Sauvegarde de la Medina</i>

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Table 1: Key Differences between the MDGs and the SDGs

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PEC

Program of Empowerment of Communes  
*From French: Programme d'Empowerment des Communes*

PQD

PQR

"Five-Year Development Plan  
*From French: Plan Quinquennal de Développement*

PUGL

Five-year Regional Development Plan  
*From French: Plan Quinquennal de Développement Régional*

SDC

SDG

Urban Development and Local Governance Program  
*From French: Programme de Développement Urbain et*

SEDCI

*de Gouvernance Locale* Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

UCLG

Sustainable Development Goals

UN

Secretary of State for Development and International Cooperation  
*From French: Secrétaire d'Etat pour le Développement et la Coopération Internationale*

UNDP

UNESCO UNRIC

World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments

USAID

VNG

United Nations

United Nations Development Program

VNR  
Tables

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

United Nations Regional Information Centre

Voluntary National Review

United States Agency for International Development

Association of Netherlands Municipalities

## Introduction

In 2014, Tunisia emerged from the Arab Spring as one of the only successful democracies in the MENA region. With a new constitution and a series of decentralization policies, local governments set out to develop and implement new planning practices. Just one year later, the country adopted the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and cities began to develop strategic plans towards their attainment. Since then, public participation is required to play a more prominent role in decision making processes. Meanwhile, Tunisian youth are at the center of these global, national, and local strategies. Those who spearheaded the revolution in 2010-2011, continue to be drivers of planning policy and action. The following research aims to uncover the complex dynamics that spur urban policy and planning, by examining the intersection of the *global*, the *regional*, and the *local* in post-revolutionary Tunisian cities. These three levels of inquiry, typically studied in their own separate silos, benefit in this case from a cross-sectional perspective allowing for a more holistic view of context and consequence on planning.

This thesis aims to explore three levels of policy and planning action to uncover how global, local, and grassroots movements interact with one another in Tunisia, and the subsequent implications on decision-making processes. Three guiding questions frame the research: How are SDGs, as global frameworks, localized in cities and what are their implications for local decision-making, particularly in the Tunisian context? How has urban planning changed since the Tunisian revolution and how has it affected public participation, participatory planning, design processes, and project implementation? What are the roles of youth-driven groups and how are youth initiatives carving out new paths for project and policy implementation in post-revolution Tunisia? These questions will shed light on micro-level and municipal-level projects and how they fit into the larger frameworks at the national level, and perhaps also at the global scale.

The timing of the research also seems opportune. It has now been 10 years since the Revolution, and the world is currently less than 10 years from the 2030 target for SDG attainment. As such, the following work serves as a record of the strides made and challenges encountered thus far, while also questioning the effectiveness of past and current decision-making strategies, and providing insights for furthering progress. The thesis begins with a brief background of the Tunisian context, followed by a section on research methods. The outcomes of the research are structured into three main chapters. Chapter 1 first explains the history of the SDGs and provides planning critiques or ‘words of caution’ as to how these goals play out at the local level. The chapter then explores Tunisia’s commitment to integrating the SDGs into national, regional and local strategies in an effort to align with global partners and stakeholders. Chapter 2 investigates the role of Tunisian municipalities in the design of participatory planning after the Arab Spring and lays out the socio-political context in which these planning actions emerge. Advantages and disadvantages of decentralization policy become apparent through three concrete examples of municipal projects. Chapter 3 then focuses on the rise of youth activism since the Revolution and youth’s ability to drive change in planning practices<sup>1</sup>. In conclusion, I discuss the implications of these various initiatives as they relate to local and global frameworks and provide some insights as to what could further the progress of urban planning and development policy in Tunisia.



1 • A note on the Literature Review: Rather than providing a single comprehensive *Literature Review* section for the entire thesis, each chapter will begin with a concise review, setting the stage for the topic explored. 2

Figure 1: Map of Tunisia's 24 Governorates *Map created by author*





TUNISIA

100 km <sup>3</sup> N

## Background: Tunisia's Revolutionary Trajectory

There is today an unprecedented window of opportunity for Tunisia to embark on deep structural reforms to open the channels conducive to a more equal and inclusive society and put the country on a path of more sustainable development.

World Bank Group, 2015

Though smaller sized than its North African neighbors, Tunisia's position at the intersection of Sub-saharan African, Middle Eastern, and South European geographies and cultures, make it a true socio-cultural melting pot (Kaki, 2003). Its rich and dynamic history makes it a place where modernity coexists alongside deeply entrenched local traditions, stemming from passing civilizations – from the Carthaginians, the Romans, the various Muslim-Arab dynasties, the Ottomans, and to the French colonization. Each of these legacies shaped the contemporary Tunisia we know today.

The Republic of Tunisia emerged after gaining independence from the French in 1956. Under the presidential rules of Bourguiba, and his successor for 23 years, Ben Ali,

decision-making was centralized in the capital Tunis. The centralization policies, when coupled with the heavy corruption and strong censorship of Ben Ali's dictatorship, left little room for citizen participation or public opinion. This in turn resulted in decades of unequal resource distribution, creating disparities between the inner regions and coastal cities, ultimately resulting in various protests as early as 2008 that eventually culminated in the 2010-2011 Revolution that catalyzed the Arab Spring.

In December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit vendor, set himself on fire in front of the governor's office of Sidi Bouzid (located in the center of the country, see Figure 1) in response to a police officer confiscating his cart – the source of his livelihood. Public anger intensified following his subsequent death and young Tunisians took to the streets to voice their concerns about government corruption, police abuse, and rampant unemployment. Honwana (2013) thus summarizes the cascade of events that ensued:

The spark lit by Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid ignited a regional youth protest against police abuse and unemployment, that spread into a youth movement fighting for better living conditions and freedom of expression, which was then transformed into a nationwide coalition that managed to overthrow one of the most entrenched dictatorial regimes in North Africa.

Howana, 2013: 5

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This nationwide Tunisian Revolution then transcended borders, spreading across the MENA region, inspiring citizens across the globe to rise up against oppressive regimes. The focus of this research is post-revolution Tunisia and the ways in which urban policy and decision-making processes have shifted in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Since the adoption of the new Constitution in 2014, decentralization has expanded the role of local municipalities and is becoming increasingly tangible, shifting power to the local level. Further, after adopting a new constitution in 2014, Tunisia joined 193 other countries in committing to SDG attainment by 2030 and began incorporating these global goals in localized municipal contexts. Five year plans – *Les Stratégies de Développement Durables*, Strategic Plans for Sustainable Development in several cities – the 2019 National Voluntary Report (showcasing the country's successes and challenges with regard to the SDGs), and new national and regional development plans, are just a few concrete examples of the changes that have occurred since 2011. Finally, the country is witnessing a significant rise in the number of local NGOs and youth-driven initiatives, a direct result of the reclaiming of the right to the city post-Revolution.

It is important to understand whether or not the newly instaurated decentralization policies, global frameworks, and youth movements – which all emphasize participation – are truly influencing planning policy and project implementation, or whether municipalities and NGOs are simply checking off administrative boxes in order to continue to secure international aid and funding. Indeed, international funding institutions (IFIs) and other overseas organizations often act as middlemen, supporting local initiatives that align with their own mission statements (Table 3, Appendix C, shows the different focus areas and projects from some of the key IFIs currently operating in Tunisia). Depending on their mission statements and projects underway, IFIs may focus more on regional sustainable and economic development, good governance, and employment; or turn their attention to cultural heritage, the arts, and place-making and social inclusion (including gender equality); whilst others will concentrate on environmental issues. . . Mapping out these organizations and where they fit into planning processes is critical to understanding not only their levels of influence but also how they align with various goals, such as the UN SDGs.

Each chapter of Tunisia’s rich history and recent historical moments shape the current state of Tunisian cities today. While the task may seem gargantuan, I believe it is important to explore these critical pieces from the global to the local scale, as each ultimately guides the way planning policy materializes throughout the lived and built environment of Tunisian citizens in their cities.

## Methodology

Existing literature and documentation related to the UN SDGs, the decentralization policies that ensued from the Revolution, and contemporary youth movements were analyzed and cross-referenced with sources including planning journals, academic articles, and official governmental and organizational reports. These documents act as the foundation of the research, contextualizing each of the three main structuring pieces of the thesis: the UN SDGs, Tunisian municipal policies and participatory planning post revolution, and youth in planning. Since there is scarce academic writing pertaining to youth-led planning initiatives, Tunisian media sources, and social media posts (particularly Facebook and Instagram) were also reviewed to supplement the research.

In addition to archival research and a literature review on the three main topics, the research also includes a series of interviews with key stakeholders in Tunisia to understand their various roles in affecting change at the local and global levels. Interviewees consist of community members, private sector professionals, and NGO and local government officials, who have actively participated in or influenced the implementation of plans, programs, and policies that align with the UN SDG framework. They also include youth leaders who are making

significant strides in their neighborhoods. For the purpose of the research I define youth as the period between 15 and 24 years. This definition stems from the literature reviewed, particularly the work of Bastien & Holmarsdottir, who adopted the same age range based on World Bank, UN, and UNESCO definitions (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2017: 7).

This qualitative approach provides insights into how global policy— such as the UN SDGs— lands at the local level— through the Tunisian case-study— while highlighting how youth-driven calls to action can affect measurable change.

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### Chapter 1 | The UN SDGs

#### *Implications of global policy frameworks at the local level*

Shortly after adopting a new Constitution in January 2014, Tunisia joined 193 countries in committing to SDG attainment by 2030. Though Tunisia's alignment with UN frameworks is not a novelty in itself, the timing of this new goal-setting chapter is noteworthy. The drafting of the 2014 Constitution coincided with national consultations with various stakeholders and a country-wide survey that culminated in the report *La Tunisie que Nous Voulons - The Tunisia We Want*, which sets the stage for the Post

2015 Agenda. Furthermore, after adopting the SDGs in 2015, Tunisia was one of several countries selected to prepare a *Voluntary National Review (VNR)* tracking the progress of SDG attainment in 2019. Fast forward to 2021, marking a decade since the Tunisian Revolution and leaving less than a decade for the country and the rest of the world from their 2030 targets.

This chapter first provides a brief history of the SDGs and how they came to be, situating the goals within urban planning theory, wherein we find words of caution and optimism with regard to their implementation and monitoring, as global frameworks seek effect at the local

level. The chapter then dives into the Tunisian context to further inspect how the SDGs are marketed and localized in cities and their implications (physical and financial) for local decision-making and project implementation.

## 1.1 Situating Global Frameworks in Urban Planning Theory

The emergence of global urban policy initiatives represents a distinctive reconfiguring of planning, that is at the same time more inclusive and also dangerously all embracing.

Barnett and Parnell, 2018: 25

### 1.1.1 From MDGs to SDGs: a fundamental change in the way we think about cities

As an architect and student of Urban Planning, I have learned to recognize the important role that history plays in shaping the present and future of the built environment and the socio-spatial trends that breathe life into our urban realms. To fully understand the distinctiveness of the SDGs, it is important to take a quick look back at the global policies preceding them.

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#### *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Approval, Critiques, and Influence*

The MDGs became pervasive and central in the development discourse of the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, used widely — by national governments, donors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, and the media, and within philanthropy — as consensus objectives of development, as a standard for evaluating progress, and as a reference for justifying action.

Fukuda-Parr, 2017: 1

The MDGs presented a simplistic vision of meeting basic needs for all without recognizing the root causes of poverty embedded in power relations and exacerbated by current economic models of neoliberal globalization that prioritize corporate profit over human rights.

Fukuda-Parr, 2016: 214

The MDGs were adopted in 2000 and can be viewed as one of the products of decades of UN Conferences and global *Agendas* since the first of the three *Habitat* conferences was held in the 1970s<sup>2</sup>. *The Millennium Declaration* (United Nations, 2000) “laid out a vision of

priorities that were central to the future of all the world's people: development and poverty; peace and security; environment and democracy; and human rights." (Fukuda Parr, 2014:121). Incorporated into the Declaration were eight concrete goals<sup>3</sup> consisting of 21 targets and 48 indicators to measure their attainment and success by 2015. The MDGs raised awareness about the urgency of tackling global poverty and were widely accepted by various stakeholders from national governments to local stakeholders as a framework for debate and action (Fukuda-Parr, 2017).

As commendable as these goals seemed, from the onset, they were heavily criticized mainly for their reductive nature on several counts. First, the MDGs are an explicit North South aid agenda, further exacerbating the diminutive discourse often surrounding nations of the Global South. Second, they focus primarily on poverty alleviation without necessarily addressing its underlying causes. Third, the goals were drafted internally within the UN, with little external consultation, and in an overall technocratic manner,

2 • For a more comprehensive review of the history of UN summits and frameworks, refer to Appendix X. 3 • The eight Millennium Development Goals are to (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality and empower women; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal health; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7) ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) develop a global partnership for development.

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leading to a disconnect between the goals and targets and those they primarily aimed to serve. Fourth, the number of goals were considered insufficient, the targets superficial, and overall lacking ambition (Harcourt, 2005; Fukuda-Parr, 2014; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Finally, as Fukuda-Parr (2016: 215) points out, "some of the most pressing contemporary challenges were left out: inequality, unemployment and stagnant wages, climate change, financial market volatility, migration, [and] the ineffectiveness of global institutions to manage globalization, to name a few." Harcourt (2005) attributes the goals' inadequacies to their top-down "bureaucratic" nature.

Though heavily critiqued, the MDGs undoubtedly played a key role in reshaping international development over the past decades. They set the stage for future policies and changed the norms around development discourse worldwide and across stakeholders (Fukuda-Parr, 2017).

### *The Sustainable Development Goals: a renewed focus on cities*

The approval of the Urban SDG is a product of a fluid alliance of interests and organizations that generated a coherent pro-urban discourse through which to assert the importance of cities in future development policy agendas. The intellectual drivers of the emergent agenda are networks that draw on scholars, activist,

communities, and professionals in a collaborative form of agenda setting that is quite distinct from previous rounds of urban leadership.

Barnett & Parnell, 2016: 89

On the global scale, 2015 marked a shift in planning theory and practice, when 193 countries committed to achieving 17 SDGs by 2030. More importantly, these goals distinguished themselves from previous global policy by recognizing cities as “critical sites of action” (Barnett and Parnell, 2018). Indeed the SDGs arrived on the heels of the MDGs adopted in 2000, and in many ways sought to distinguish themselves in process, content, and practice. The SDGs are focused on environmental, social, and economic sustainability; and as such apply equally to nations of the Global South and those of the Global North. Each of the 17 SDGs is broken down into a series of 169 targets “to end extreme poverty and hunger, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change.” (Blazhevskaya, 2020)

4 • The 17 SDGs are (1) No Poverty, (2) Zero Hunger, (3) Good Health and Well-being, (4) Quality Education, (5) Gender Equality, (6) Clean Water and Sanitation, (7) Affordable and Clean Energy, (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth, (9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, (10) Reduced Inequality, (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities, (12) Responsible Consumption and Production, (13) Climate Action, (14) Life Below Water, (15) Life on Land, (16) Peace and Justice Strong Institutions, (17) Partnerships to achieve the Goal. 9

The involvement of multiple stakeholders, combined with public consultations is one of many ways the SDGs strive for a more inclusive and transparent process. “As a process for elaborating international development priorities, it involved an unprecedented level of participation by governments, civil society groups, academics, business groups, and UN agencies, in intense debates in meetings around the world and over the internet.” (Fukuda-Parr, 2016: 216 citing Norton and Stuart, 2015) In anticipation of developing a post-2015 agenda, a Sustainable Cities Thematic Group advocated for the creation and adoption of a dedicated urban SDG by conducting a public campaign in 2013 and 2014 (Barnett and Parnell, 2016).

Indeed, the key particularity of the SDGs is the emphasis on urban issues within cities. Goal 11 – “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable” – is often considered the most extensive, in that its ten targets range from ensuring adequate housing, to mitigating climate change, to enforcing participatory processes in local planning, among other objectives. In addition, the number of goals allows for more specificity in tackling those key urban issues that were neglected by global policy in the past, such as women and gender issues (Goal 5), inequality (Goal 10), sustainable and inclusive economic growth (Goal 8), and urban governance (Goal 16) (Fukuda-Parr, 2016).

### *Past and Current Frameworks*

The difference between the MDGs and the SDGs expresses the change in praxis, as

summarized in Table 1. The MDGs, which were drafted with limited consultations by technocrats from heads of development



agencies, focused almost solely on poverty alleviation and were more concerned with generating public support for developing countries than on addressing the root causes of inequality. In contrast, the SDGs' larger scope, participatory nature, and heavy focus on governance and implementation, makes them "potentially more transformative" (Fukuda-Parr, 2016).

8 goals 21 targets 48 indicators	17 goals 169 targets 232 indicators
Focus on poverty alleviation in developing countries.	Focus on environmental, social, and economic sustainability.
Drafted by technocrats with limited consultations.	Drafted by an appointed task force and an Open Working Group engaged in diplomatic negotiations with open multi-stakeholder involvement over the course of a 3-year period.

Table 1: Key differences between the MDGs and SDGs  
*Table by author based on literature review.*

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MDGs	SDGs
A "narrow, reflecting a top-down process of elaboration," North South agenda (Fukuda Parr, 2016)	A "broader and more transformative," Global agenda (Fukuda-Parr, 2016)

What makes the SDGs unique in comparison to past frameworks such as the MDGs is their all-encompassing nature. Yet, the goals' all-encompassing nature is a double edged sword; the SDGs attempts to be comprehensive has also left many dubious of their effectiveness and countries' ability to actually attain them.

1.1.2. Critiques & Limitations of the SDGs

*The Vaguely All-Encompassing*

The SDGs are nothing if not ambitious and sometimes difficult to grasp particularly at a granular level. Barnett and Parnell warn that "the emergence of global urban policy initiatives represents a distinctive reconfiguring of planning, that is at the same time more inclusive and also dangerously all embracing." (Barnett and Parnell, 2018:25). Indeed, in a 2016 article, Vanessa Watson evokes the dangers of these generalizing frameworks and their lack of specific socio-political and cultural context, making it difficult to believe in SDG attainment, especially in such a short period of time (Watson, 2016).

One key concern is the ability of local stakeholders to implement the adequate policies toward achieving these global goals. As will be explored later through the Tunisian case study, local governments in developing countries often lack financial and human resources to tackle large objectives. The question of city management capabilities should not be neglected when

thinking about SDG implementation (Parnell, 2015). This applies both to resource allocation and local politics. The Goals' textual vagueness allows for a wider interpretation by city, regional, and national officials, affecting not only implementation but also the way attainment is measured (Parnell, 2015; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Allen, 2018).

When it comes to measuring outcomes, a second concern is the use of primarily quantitative metrics in dealing with often complex issues. "Goals use the power of numbers to communicate a development agenda with a sense of scientific certitude and serious intent with potential for accountability. But in reality, quantification reduces complex and intangible visions – such as development that is inclusive – into concrete measurable objectives." (Fukuda-Parr, 2016:219) This reliance on quantitative measurements poses a second issue of comparing attainment amongst different countries who may not have access to the same forms of data or whose data is aggregated on different levels. While quantitative goals can be helpful in the creation and implementation of successful development projects, arbitrary quantitative goals can further entrench some of the same macro inequities the goals were intended to tackle.

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### *Repeating past mistakes*

Another question to consider is whether or not we can deliver real change if we continue to operate within the same frameworks that have historically been ineffectual. Kaika (2017) highlights the fact that while the SDGs claim to be taking new approaches to achieving goals, they do so within the same overall frameworks of the past – frameworks that have continuously failed to meaningfully move the needle in the long term. Indeed according to the latest annual UN Report (2020), given the current COVID crisis, the entire world is poised not to achieve its goals by 2030 – with some targets' progress even regressing. Kaika thus argues for a change in interlocutors when it comes to implementing global sustainability agendas, emphasizing the need to allow those that have been previously silenced – i.e. the citizens themselves – to express their desires. This would mark a true change in common, exclusionary, and colonial practices by empowering citizens to become decision-makers and drivers of progress.

#### *1.1.3 Successfully Localizing the SDGs: A more optimistic view*

### *Localizing the Global and Fostering Trust*

On the other hand, Watson does offer a glimpse of hope when contemplating the role of planning and planners in achieving buy-in from local governments and citizen-led action. Successful implementation of global policy can occur, if and when these frameworks are re-appropriated at a local level and redesigned to 'fit' (Watson, 2016). Laberge and Touihri argue that localizing the goals and targets is not only what makes them more relevant but also

more attainable in emphasizing local accountability. The key is involving a mix of state and non-state actors and enforcing public-monitoring. For instance, defining Tunisia's unique goals—or adapting the SDGs to the country's context— means relying on survey based data collection rather than administrative data; thereby “capturing a nationally representative snapshot of all socio-demographic groups and all regions of the country.” (Laberge & Touihri, 2019:154). According to the authors, making the indicators subject to public opinion makes them more reliable and helps to foster trust in governance systems – something sorely lacking in Tunisia prior to the Revolution. Watson, Laberge, and Touihri are optimistic that localizing global goals and selecting indicators that are defined and measured with the help of local stakeholders and citizen participation, will lead to more successful outcomes when it comes to reaching the 2030 targets.

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### *An opportunity for Co-learning*

Finally, Barnett and Parnell explore how past and more recent theoretical and academic frameworks affect the way we approach SDG development, implementation, and monitoring, and note the new opportunities for co-learning. They recognize the ways in which SDGs differ from their predecessors since they incorporate more local knowledge through public participation and transparent processes. They focus on SDG11: “the Urban SDG” and aim to situate this goal within past and current urban theoretical frameworks, claiming that the advent of the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs are proof of “a broader renaissance of urban thinking.” It is within this “urban renaissance” that cities take center stage in urban public policy with new interest in co-learning between cities of the Global North and cities of the Global South.

#### 1.2. Tunisia and the Post 2015 Agenda

Shortly after adopting the 2014 Constitution, Tunisia began incorporating these global goals in localized municipal contexts in pursuit of their commitment to SDG attainment by 2030. As mentioned in the brief introduction to this chapter, Tunisia's alignment with the SDGs is not the country's first commitment to this type of global framework. In 2000, Tunisia adopted the MDGs for 2015. The MDG targets and the process of envisioning next steps for Tunisia's engagement to a global agenda coincided with the Revolution and subsequent socio-political reforms. As such, the year 2014-2015 was transitional for the country on multiple levels as it aimed to maintain its position amongst the international community and address the demands of the Revolution, all while incorporating more equitable and inclusive development strategies at different levels of governance.

This work is of capital importance, not only because it reflects the commitments of our country vis-à-vis the international community in areas as decisive as those relating to development and human rights, but also and above all, given the essential nature of these studies in the design and conduct of inclusive development strategies and policies in post-Revolution Tunisia.

Noureddine Zekri, Secretary of State for Development and International Cooperation in *The Tunisia We Want* Report, 2014 : 4

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### 1.2.1 The Tunisia We Want

As Tunisia navigated through the aftermaths of the Revolution, the country also took stock of its progress in attaining the Millennium Development Goals and conducted a series of public consultations to understand citizen priorities with regard to future development goals. The Secretary of State for Development and International Cooperation (SEDCI) and the United Nations (UN) in Tunisia, conducted a survey *La Tunisie que Nous Voulons (The Tunisia We Want)* that collected the opinions of over 10,000 citizens (*The World We Want* Report, 2014).

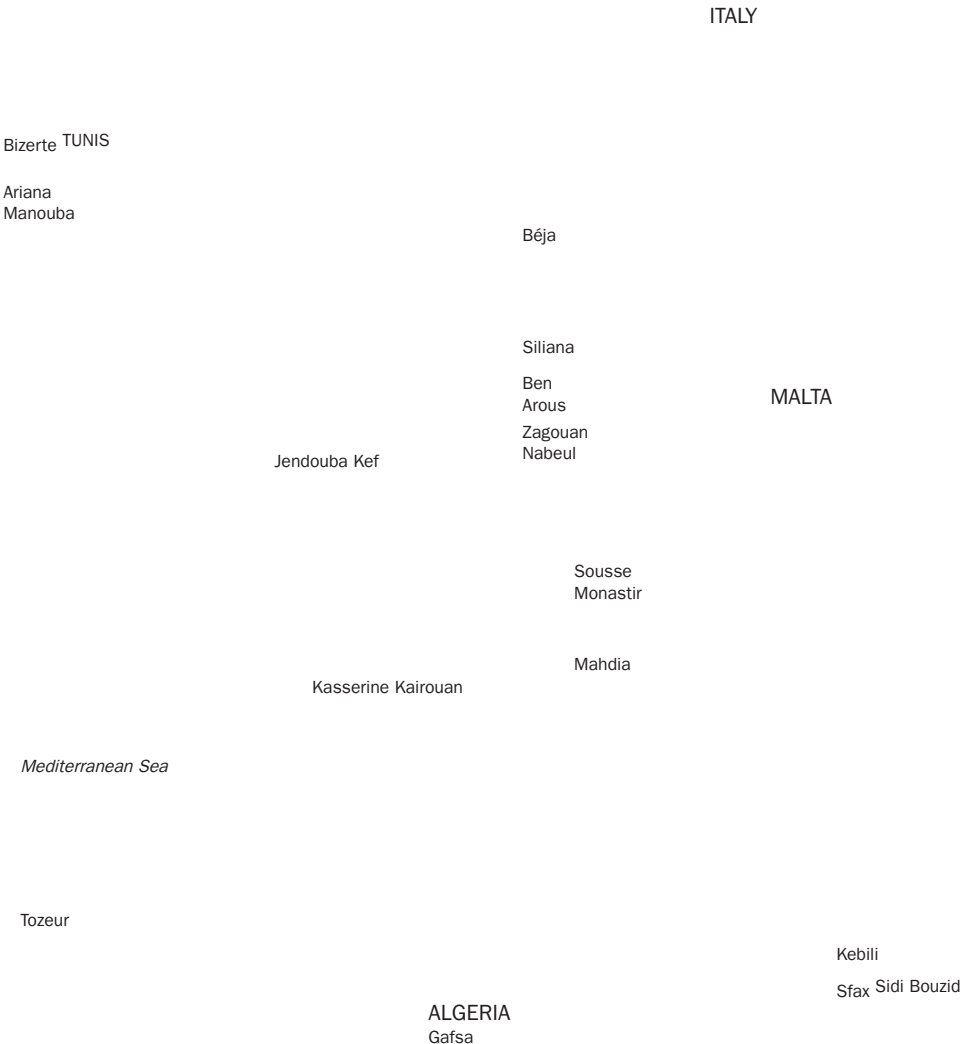
*The Tunisia We Want* Report published in 2014 represents the synthesis of three main sources to understand citizen priorities. First, the UN's standard online survey MY World, was completed by 7,300 Tunisians, the vast majority (78%) of which were between the ages of 16 and 45. A *Questionnaire National, National Survey*, was also posted online and distributed in paper form across regions; 3,000 paper surveys were completed. The final question from the National Survey asked Tunisians to select 5 priorities from a list of 16 focus areas. These focus areas were inspired from the online MYWorld Survey, but were re-tailored to the Tunisian context. Lastly, UN representatives worked alongside local government actors and local associations to meet citizens in person and assess their priorities through various meetings and workshops (*The Tunisia We Want* Report, 2014). Table 2, compiled based on the 2014 Report, summarizes these events below.

Although the public consultations only took place in 9 out of 24 governorates, the process behind *The Tunisia We Want* Report represents an unprecedented level of participation from civil society with regard to formulating the country's national agenda. Were it not for the Revolution, it is highly likely that this process would have occurred in the typical pre-Revolution bureaucratic manner with little to no participation at all. The selected governorates spanned

across the country, including coastal and inner regions from the North and South, as seen in the map below. The round-tables and workshops that took place between May and August 2014, going beyond the online survey, reflect the greater aim for transparency and inclusivity, and are ultimately a recognition of the value of public participation.

5 • In 2013, the UN launched MY World (<http://vote.myworld2015.org/>), a global online survey that reached over 1 million people in 194 countries, meant to better understand what citizens priorities were for the post 2015 agenda. The results of the survey were shared with global leaders at the 68th General Assembly in New York City. (United Nations SDG Action Campaign, 2013)

14  
Figure 2: Map of Governorates Hosting 2014  
Public Consultations *Map created by author*



Medenine

Gabès

Tataouine

9 Participating Governorates  
 hosted **publics consultations**,  
 from May to August 2014,  
 providing feedback for  
*The Tunisia We Want* Report  
 informing priorities for the **Post-2015 Agenda**.

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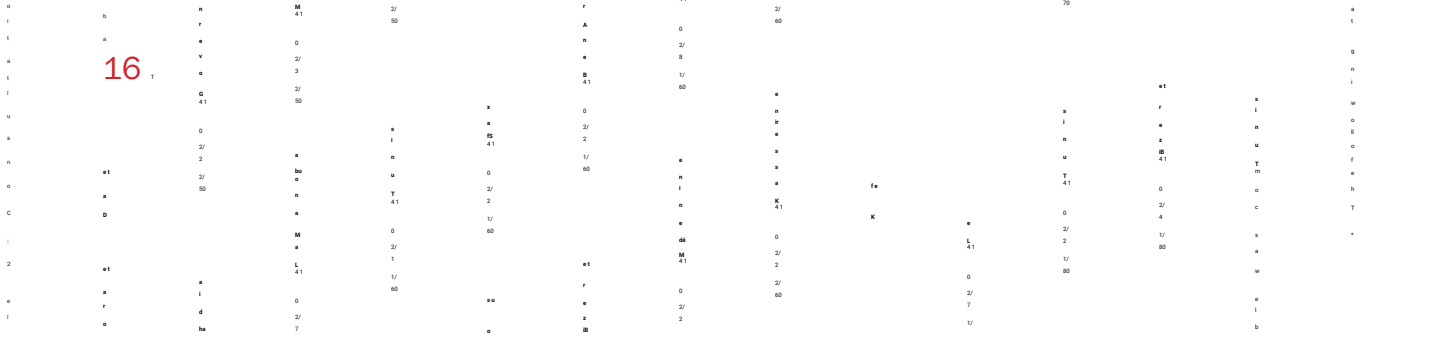








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Six major priorities emerged from this series of surveys and consultations: (1) education, (2) reducing poverty and creating better food systems, (3) the health system, (4) employment, (5) governance, and (6) lessening regional disparities (*The Tunisia We Want Report*, 2014). Both the National Survey (85%) and the MYWorld Survey (75%) revealed that

education is considered a top priority for Tunisians. Tunisia may have effectively achieved universal primary education for all by 2015 (in accordance with the MDGs), yet 78% of those surveyed are advocating for an “urgent reform of the education system” that is seen by many as a root cause of unemployment (*The Tunisia We Want* Report, 2014). It is this very type of nuance that is addressed in the post-2015 Agenda. As highlighted in the previous section of this Chapter, the UN SDGs go beyond the MDGs both in the nature of the goals and in the process behind their creation. Today, the country is less than 10 years away from the 2030 targets and evermore focused on implementing projects that effectively localize the SDGs.

## 1.2.2 Localizing the SDGs in Tunisia

### *Tunisia’s Voluntary National Review (VNR), 5 years into implementation*

At the national level, fulfillment of the UN SDGs is steered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* (MAE)) and the Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation (*Ministère de Développement, de l’Investissement et de la Coopération Internationale* (MDICI)) in cooperation with the UN in Tunisia. In 2018, in accordance with UN guidelines, 17 working groups composed of state and non-state actors organized a series of meetings and consultations towards implementing a *Voluntary National Review* (VNR). Members of civil society, the private sector, universities, and youth came together across regions in an effort to localize the SDGs within the Tunisian context and assess the country’s progress (VNR, 2019).

One of the key takeaways from the 2019 VNR is the alignment of the SDGs with the Tunisian Constitution and the country’s overall national development strategies. Tunisia’s *Plan Quinquennal de Développement 2016-2020* (PQD 2016-2020), a Five-Year Development Plan for 2016-2020, integrates the SDG targets into its national strategy. The PQD is largely based on five main axes each of which draw on similar language and objectives as the SDGs. The first axis on good governance, administrative reform, and the fight against corruption aligns with Goal 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions, and focuses on reinforcing decentralization policies and creating a more transparent and accountable governance system. Axis 2’s main objective is to transform Tunisia into an

6 • The net enrollment rate of children age 6 to 11 is 99.2% (VNR, 2019)

economic hub, promoting the employment targets in Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. Axis 3 focuses on human development and social inclusion with objectives ranging from reducing poverty (Goal 1: No Poverty), to enforcing social welfare protections and extending health coverage (Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being), and to promoting gender equality (Goal 5: Gender Equality). Axis 4 concentrates on regional ambitions and aims to

lessen the disparities between inner regions and more developed coastal areas (Goal 10: Reduced Inequality). Finally, Axis 5's main purpose is to combat climate change, with explicit mention of the global goals and effort to "introduce international environmental conservation indicators into development" (Goal 13: Climate Action) (PQD 2016-2020).

The MDICI further conducted the *Analyse Rapide Intégrée* in 2018, an analysis showing that 84 of the 105 SDG targets could be found in the Tunisian PQD 2016-2020 (VNR, 2019: 16). MDICI has also pledged to integrate the remaining targets in its upcoming PQD for 2021-2025. This type of commitment to integrating the SDGs into national strategies highlights the country's efforts to adapt and align their strategies with their global partners.

### *Localized Projects at the Regional and Municipal Level*

National development strategies serve to inform more concrete plans and projects at the local level. If 2015 marked a global shift in planning theory and practice, it is due in part to the recognition of cities themselves as "critical sites of action" (Barnett and Parnell, 2018:26). Within the ever-growing international framework, Barnett and Parnell recognize "local and regional territorial action as an important dimension of global changes" (Barnett and Parnell, 2018:27).

The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, "a coordination and consultation mechanism that brings together the major international networks of local governments to undertake joint advocacy work relating to global policy processes" (Global Taskforce, 2021), with facilitation from the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), a global network of cities and their associations based in Barcelona, developed a Local and Regional Governments' Report for the UN 2019 High Level Political Forum (UCLG, 2019) in which they "explore the involvement of Local and Regional Governments in the localization of the SDGs" (UCLG, 2019). The report mentions Tunisia thirteen times, highlighting several examples of the country's efforts in effectively localizing the global goals for 2030.

7 • "The HLPF is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development and it has a central role in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global level." (UN, 2021)

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At the regional planning level, several governorates have integrated the SDGs in their *Plan Quinquennal de Développement Régional* (PQR), Regional Development Plan. The Governorate of Médenine was the first to integrate SDG targets and indicators into the PQR's objectives. Drafting the PQR relied on a participatory approach involving more than 600 stakeholders from public sector representatives, members of civil society, members of the private sector, local universities, and to regional professional organizations. The PQR's took the



national PQD to the next level by explicitly matching each objective of the regional plan with the SDG targets most relevant to the region (VNR, 2019).

The SDGs are similarly being integrated into certain municipalities' *Stratégies de Développement de la Ville*, City Strategic Development Plans. These five-year plans for 2030 are being piloted in nine cities by the Madinatouna Program in partnership with the *Fédération Nationale des Villes Tunisiennes* (FNVT)<sup>8</sup>, MedCities, UNDP, and Lab'Baladiya. Madinatouna aims to (1) "promote integrated regional sustainable development using a multi-actor, multi-sector approach," (2) "strengthen dialogue, coordination, and synergy between local actors," (3) "emphasize the inclusive participation of all actors, particularly young people, women, and vulnerable populations," and (4) "promote the strategic planning experience so that it can be used by other municipalities" (VNR, 2019). The program is an example of how national, regional and local strategies coalesce into a comprehensive plan that prioritizes SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. Chapter 2 further details the implications of the Madinatouna program on decision-making processes within the nine cities that have initiated their plans since 2016.

Whether at the national, regional or local level, contextualizing the SDGs requires a joint effort between a vast array of stakeholders. International organizations such as CILG VNG, the GIZ, the SDC, USAID, AFD, Cities Alliance, and the UNDP, among other cooperative agencies<sup>9</sup> work hand-in-hand with local NGOs such as the FNVT, to promote projects that align with the 2030 Goals. The FNVT plays a key role in guiding and implementing projects on the ground. In 2014, the FNVT with support from the GIZ launched Wama-Net, a waste management guidance program for 20 municipalities (Global Taskforce, 2019; Zine, 2014). In 2018, the Federation launched Lab'Baladiya, a bilateral training program for

<sup>8</sup> • The FNVT is "a national association which brings together Tunisian municipalities, created in 1973 to support the municipal sector and defend the interests of municipalities and represent them within public authorities in national and international bodies." The association has undergone several changes since the Revolution, notably a change in name from *Fédération Nationale des Villes Tunisiennes* to *Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes*- National Federation of Tunisian Cities to National Federation of Tunisian Communes. The FNCT are one of the main stakeholders paving the way forward towards more inclusive and sustainable local initiatives. (FNVT)

<sup>9</sup> • Refer to Table 3, Appendix C for a review of international stakeholders.

Mediterranean municipalities (UCLG, 2019). The program addressed issues of governance, environmental and energy efficiency, agriculture and circular economies, heritage, cities and public spaces, and regional planning with training workshops held in Bizerte, Tozeur, Kelibia, Le Kef, Kairouan, and Sfax from December 2018 through June 2019 (Lab'Baladiya).

*Paving a way forward, towards success?*

The success of the above-mentioned plans relies on fruitful and meaningful interaction between multiple stakeholders. The range of public to private sector actors (on a local, regional, national, and international scale); who is leading the charge; who is financing the design and implementation of these projects; and where the participatory process lies are among the many complex variables inherent to the successful attainment of the SDGs by 2030. Aida Robbana, former Coordination Specialist on SDG Programs and Innovation at the UNDP in Tunisia and current Chief of UN-Habitat in Tunisia, believes in the importance of following through with the 17 SDGs despite the country's recent challenges. In an interview, she mentioned the worsening economic situation in Tunisia, which has been further exacerbated by the current global health crisis. Though Robbana remains skeptical regarding the quality of achievement particularly with regards to education and health, she seemed convinced that municipalities could play a key role in localizing the Goals, emphasizing the value of the post-Revolution decentralization policies and the important role of youth leaders in paving the way towards a more sustainable future for cities and the country as a whole.

More than a series of targets measured by indicators, the SDGs are meant to act as a framework guiding local planning, public participation, and action. From the national to the local level, localizing and contextualizing the 2030 Goals is crucial to success according both to the literature and experience. Global frameworks converging with Post-Revolution decentralization policies (explored in Chapter 2) and grassroots youth movements (explored in Chapter 3) have significant implications for local decision-making and project implementation. This in turn changes the nature of planning for Tunisian citizens, providing the people new opportunities and agency to become makers of their neighborhoods, cities, regions, and country.

The Tunisian Revolution, which unfolded from December 17, 2010 to January 14, 2011, served as the impetus for a region-wide Arab Spring and geopolitical transformation. The decentralization policies that ensued after the new Constitution's adoption in January 2014 and the country's 2018 Municipal Elections marked significant transformations in urban governance and planning.

This chapter's first two sections briefly place Tunisia's revolution in context and describe the shift from a highly centralized system of governance and planning to country wide decentralization. The following sections explore the advantages and limitations of decentralization in practice at the municipal level. Post-revolution decentralization policies, particularly at the municipal level, affected public participation, planning practices, and decision-making. Chapter 2 focuses on project implementation, and municipalities' role in bringing their localities closer to more participatory models of planning. Archival research and targeted interviews with national and local government officials and members of civil society, allow for a more in depth investigation of the inner workings of city-planning, as well as the roles of various stakeholders. While research since the revolution has been primarily focused on the national level, this chapter aims to highlight the importance of local governance systems in shaping Tunisian cities.

## 2.1 Tunisia's Revolution in context

The civic unrest leading up to the Tunisian Revolution had been brewing in the inner regions of the country several years before reaching the boiling point. From the protests in Gafsa, Kasserine, and other inner regions, to the uprisings in Sidi Bouzid, citizens voiced their exasperation with government corruption and cried out against the lack of jobs and unequal development plaguing the most vulnerable regions of the country. Indeed, colonial legacies of the French protectorate, privileging coastal cities over inner regions, are the source of many socio-spatial inequalities including widening gaps in infrastructure and service provision, education, and job accessibility (Salman & Baird-Zars, 2019). Protests in the country's hinterlands marked the beginning of what Zemni calls "a gradual process of rallying different types and forms of localized social mobilizations with social and economic demands to converge into a national uprising." (Zemni, 2017:3)

With this background context, the spark that truly catalyzed the Revolution was ignited on December 17, 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the governor's office of Sidi Bouzid. His act of protest, in response to a police officer confiscating

his fruit vending cart – the source of his livelihood – quickly spread across the country. The location of Bouazizi's ultimate act of protest not only provides context, but also highlights the significance of the public's relationship with their municipal governments. His cry for dignity and recognition took place in the street for all to witness and was explicitly directed at the municipalities themselves. As the public and urban nature of this act spread, it gathered people from across the country to a common cause.

The Revolution brought people together from different social groups – particularly

Tunisian youth – from inner regions to coastal cities alike (Zemni, 2017), in what Honwana (2013) calls a “nationwide coalition” that bridged socio-spatial divides. Municipalities located in the inner coastal regions were particularly marginalized and ignored during the Ben Ali era. In a policy briefing to the Brookings Doha Center, Larbi Sadiki (2019) provides a critical assessment of “the brand of development implemented since Tunisia’s independence,” highlighting the unequal distribution of resources across Tunisian cities and the challenges the country faces post-Revolution in addressing those historically marginalized regions.

After decades of submission to dictatorship and dealing with corrupt politicians catering exclusively to their personal agendas, Tunisians wanted proper representation and transparency. In what can only be viewed as a direct response to this demand for new representation, the Ministry of the Interior dismissed all municipal councils on January 15, 2011, the day following Ben Ali’s departure. Each municipality established Special Delegations composed of local actors that would accompany the period of political transition (Clarke et. al., 2019). Less than a year after the initial uprisings, the country held its first democratic parliamentary elections, forming a National Assembly that drafted a new constitution. Finally, as much as protests revealed people’s exasperation with “the system” itself, the Revolution was also about reclaiming the urban realm, and perhaps more importantly reclaiming a sense of dignity and power over their fate.

## 2.2 The 2014 Constitution & May 2018 Elections: Democratizing Decentralization

In January 2014, Tunisia adopted a new constitution. Title VII in particular shifts power from the national to the local level through decentralization policies, which led to the creation of new municipalities across the country, and calls for participation in urban policy. Article 139, in particular focuses on the latter:

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Local governments adopt the mechanisms of participatory democracy and the principles of open governance to ensure greater participation of citizens and civil society in the preparation of development and land-use planning projects and the monitoring of their implementation, in accordance with the law.

Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, Article 139, Title VII

Eighty-six new municipalities were created and the country held its first truly democratic municipal elections in May 2018, resulting in 7,200 local officials representing 350 total municipalities (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018). In addition, “the law governing the municipal elections [stipulates] that municipal and regional councils must have gender parity”, and that “each list must include someone under age thirty-five among the first three candidates”(Yerkes & Muasher, 2018:9). Although nearly 70% of Tunisia’s 12 million population lives in urban

areas (UN Report, 2020), up until this turning point, more than 50% of Tunisia was “non-municipalized”, meaning that one-third of the population could not vote for their local leaders and had no designated place to voice their concerns (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018). The goal of “complete coverage” supports the idea that if each locality has its own municipality, then all citizens’ voices can be heard (Salman, 2019). These strides for community participation at the municipal level contrast with Tunisia’s pre-revolution highly centralized administrative system inherited from French colonialism and propagated under the Ben Ali regime.

The previous system granted municipalities little-to-no authority. Smoke-screen elections were held at the municipal level, but local leaders ultimately lacked budgetary power and any room for manoeuvre that were unsanctioned by the ruling party of the time. Mayors and council members alike were puppets of the regime, dependent on state funds, and relegated to the management of public buildings and basic services (Clarke et. al., 2019:1366). “Before the Revolution, no one could make complaints or demands,” as Salman ironically states in her lecture, “they relied on the benevolence of the state to grace them with the gift of infrastructure” (Salman, 2019).

### 2.3 Advantages and Limitations of Decentralization

Miraftab, Silver, and Beard define decentralization as “the devolution of governmental responsibilities from strong central governments to localities” (Miraftab et al, 2008). The literature on decentralization paints two seemingly opposing pictures of the advantages and limitations of decentralization. In theory, decentralization acts as a catalyst for democratic reform, strengthened civil society, and increased efficiency. In practice, the complexities of how decentralization is implemented can lead to difficulties in achieving the positive outcomes.

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Decentralized planning first appeared in the 1970s – when the efficacy of central government systems across the world were being questioned– with the political logic of creating more democratic and local decision-making processes. Later, it took on an economic purview, when international funding and development institutions such as the World Bank touted its efficiency as a budgeting and entrepreneurial tool (Miraftab et. al., 2008). On the one hand, decentralization is encouraged as an opportunity to rebuild trust between citizens and state (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018), as a tool for democratic reform, and as a way to increase efficiency in service delivery (Miraftab et al, 2008). By giving them more power, municipalities can become “spaces to modernize governance” (Salman & Baird-Zars, 2019). On the other hand, critics of decentralization evoke the legacies of colonialism, its inherent ties to international development organizations – who impose their agendas onto developing countries (Miraftab et al, 2008) – as well as the fear of falling back into “existing patterns of privilege and exclusion” (Salman & Baird Zars, 2019).

Though many hold positive views of decentralization as a tool to promote democracy and strengthen civil society, many critique its colonial and imperial origins, and claim it is nothing but another attempt by larger institutions to perpetuate the financial and political dependencies of developing countries. Amongst the main challenges, local governments — particularly new ones — often lack leadership experience, actual decision-making power, and the financial resources to achieve their goals. For decentralization to lead to a more democratic, inclusive, and participatory planning process, it is crucial to approach it with the understanding that the results of different policies are highly dependent on context (Miraftab et al, 2008).

In examining the Tunisian context, research and interviews with local experts confirms this decentralization dichotomy. In their report entitled *Decentralization in Tunisia: Empowering Towns, Engaging People*, Yerkes & Muasher cite an interview with Mokhtar Hammami – general director of the Ministry of the Interior’s local public collectivities in 2017, and minister of Local and Environmental Affairs from 2018 to 2020 – to shed some light onto one of the difficulties faced by municipalities in ensuring their new roles since the Revolution:

The main dilemma that we faced [when starting the decentralization process] was the dominance of the central system, which . . . turned [the municipalities] into dependent facilities and stripped them of their powers. [This centralization] created an expensive bureaucracy and distorted the image of the municipalities.

Yerkes & Muasher, 2018: 3

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An interview with Salim Rouhana, a Senior Urban Development and Resilience Specialist at the World Bank with past experiences in urban design, mobility planning, and community engagement, currently working on the Urban Development and Local Governance Program (PUGL), confirmed some of the challenges municipalities have been facing while also bringing a more optimistic lens to the forefront. When asked about observed changes in process since the Revolution, he mentioned the fact that local NGOs have become more active as they are being encouraged to take a seat at the table for municipal projects. He elaborated by stating, “Newly elected local councils were crucial and very important. Democratizing the institution and local democracy are fundamental accountability tools.” In this sense, he believes the 2018 municipal elections shifted the dynamic between citizens and local governments for the better and that the next council members to be elected in 2022 will be even more effective as they learn from their predecessors’ experiences.

Yet more important than debating the theoretical pros and cons of decentralization is to understand its complexities in practice, and investigate how policies, in different places, can lead to distinctive outcomes.

## 2.4 Reconfigured Municipal Structures and New Projects in Tunisian Cities

As Salman and Baird-Zars point out, research since the revolution has primarily focused on the national level, with little exploration of emerging local governance systems and modalities (Salman & Baird-Zars, 2019:245). Yet in order to understand the inner workings of city-life, and with it the implementation of planning policies, it is crucial to explore how decentralization policies are being translated at the local level.

In a lecture given at Barnard College in New York, Salman described the new role of municipalities as terrains of contestation and “spaces of expectation” – placing them between the street and higher government institutions (Salman, 2019). She describes how citizens have democratized the city by taking their claims from the revolutionary street into institutionalized spaces. Along with the 2014 Constitution and the 2018 municipal elections, the will of citizens now holds local elected officials accountable.

Since the municipal elections in 2018, Tunisians have witnessed more and more progress towards inclusive decision-making processes. Along with new municipal frameworks, local and international NGO activities are multiplying, attracting higher rates of citizen participation.

Additionally, the Ministry of Local Affairs and the Environment created an online portal, *Portail des Collectivités Locales* (Portal for Local Collectivities), where municipalities can post their yearly budgets and provide citizens with updates regarding public projects. A separate portal for submitting grievances is currently under construction as well. This entirely novel type of public access to information marks a significant step towards transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

A quick search into headlines revealed that in September 2018, Associative Action (a Tunisian non-profit founded in 2012) organized a series of training sessions on participatory democracy in municipalities of Gabès (Action Associative, 2019). In February 2019, Cities Alliance and Souad Anderrahim, Mayor of Tunis and representative of the FNVT, signed a half-million dollar grant agreement to support continued development in Tunisian municipalities.

The Cities Alliance grant will strengthen the capacity of local authorities to implement quick win projects in support of inclusive city development. In addition, it will facilitate the supply of technical assistance to municipalities in Tunisia, with a commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women at its core.

The following sections explore three concrete examples of planning initiatives that have taken place since the Revolution, and in which decentralization plays a key role.

#### 2.4.1 The Urban Development and Local Governance Program

Taking all the above points into consideration, it is important to note that most local planning initiatives continue to rely on international funding that is contingent upon decentralization and effective citizen participation.

One such example is the World Bank-funded Urban Development and Local Governance Program (PUGL) that aims “(i) to strengthen local governments’ performance to deliver municipal infrastructure, and (ii) to improve access to services in targeted disadvantaged neighborhoods” (World Bank Group, 2018). A key aspect of this program is the new grant transfer system that conditions the financing and number of a locality’s grants given on a set of performance evaluation mechanisms (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018:25). To qualify for funding, municipalities must meet certain conditions and are graded based on

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a series of indicators pertaining to sustainability, management, and governance (Salman, 2019). Inclusion and transparency are among the main pillars of the PUGL, thus requiring participatory mechanisms to be implemented.

Initial progress reports claim that turnout at public meetings was very successful in the early stages of the program, particularly during the immediate post-revolutionary era: “Citizens were interested and driven.” However, with time, they became fatigued with public affairs in general due to the slow nature of project implementation and the overall lag in the decentralization process.

This slow project rollout is attributed to an array of challenges, not the least of which are the limited annual budget and overall municipal resources. Municipalities barely have enough finances to cover one or two small projects, such as one as basic as a simple sidewalk improvement. According to Rouhana, the grant system should be slightly altered and municipalities should be able to apply for larger grants every two years (as opposed to each year), “that way you get people to come around a much larger project.” Rouhana also believes there is a need to rethink engagement to reignite people’s interest in public life, noting that COVID has now made it even more difficult for meaningful engagement to take place.

#### 2.4.2 The Madinatouna Program and the UN SDGs



Another example of an internationally funded program with deep local ties is the Madinatouna Program, a UNDP-driven project in collaboration with Cities Alliance, MedCities (member of the UCLG)<sup>10</sup>, the GIZ, CILG-VNG, and the FNVT. In an attempt to bridge the gap between coastal and inner cities, the program, initiated in 2015, was piloted in 9 municipalities located in the inner regions of the country.

The general mission of the Madinatouna Program is to reinforce strategic city planning and to develop participatory planning, under the umbrella of the UN SDGs for 2030. The program prioritizes SDG 11, to “make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.” The outcomes of the initiative not only includes local City Development Strategies, but also consists of training and networking as well as capitalization and dissemination components, locally and throughout the country. The program focuses on non-coastal, inner cities overlooked by the national government before the Revolution.

<sup>10</sup> • MedCities is a network of Mediterranean local governments that promotes cooperation and multilateral action between municipalities (MedCities, 2021)

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This initiative strives to break the barriers between coastal and non-coastal cities and to ensure better equity in access to infrastructure, services, and jobs. The nine selected cities are Béja, Gabès, Jendouba, Kairouan, Médenine, M’saken, Sidi Bouzid, Tataouine and La Soukra (Figure 3 localizes these cities on a map).

The program, funded in part by Cities Alliance, lies within the organization’s larger *Tunisia Country Program*, “structured around three main pillars” (Cities Alliance, *Tunisia Country Program*). The first pillar stands upon “the scaling up of strategic city planning.” This is reflected in the selection of nine different cities across the country, with the goal “to exchange views, learn from each other, and inform the national urban debate.” Secondly, the plans are largely focused on participatory approaches. “Local governments are required to produce five-year municipal investment plans and provide evidence that they are building transparent, participatory mechanisms in order to receive funding for key infrastructure projects” (Cities Alliance, *Tunisia Country Program*). Finally, looking to the future, the overarching goal is for this practice to inform the national urban debate and place Tunisia within an international framework.

Since August 2017, MedCities has been responsible for the methodological component of the project and accompanied the cities of Kairouan and Gabès in the definition of their urban strategies (MedCities, Madinatouna). In December 2017, the municipality of Gabès launched their City Development Strategy while the municipality of Kairouan followed shortly thereafter in January 2018. The plans were presented to local stakeholders. The next phase, public

participation, was set to take the form of community workshops within the following months.

The plans are entitled *Stratégies de Développement Durable de la Ville de Gabès* (Strategic Sustainable Development Plan of Gabès) and *Stratégies de Développement Durable de la Ville de Kairouan* (Strategic Sustainable Development Plan of Kairouan). They follow the same general outline and contain five phases: launch, diagnostic, strategizing, action planning, and implementation and evaluation. While the frameworks are nearly identical, the diagnostic section of each plan allows for “personalization” in accordance with local priorities. In Gabès for instance, pollution from the phosphate industry is a major environmental and health concern (MedCities, 2017). On the other hand, the Kairouan plan focuses on preserving its rich architectural heritage such as its Grand Mosque, a UNESCO world heritage site (MedCities, 2018). Each plan is based on community input and emphasizes those projects that would bring the greatest benefit to the city and its residents.

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Figure 3: Map of Tunisian Municipalities Participating in the Madinatouna Program *Map created by author*



Medenine

Gabès

Tataouine



9 municipalities have adopted

Strategic Plans since 2015

Stratégies de Développement Durable des Villes City Sustainable  
Development Strategies © MedCities

Participating Cities in the  
Madinatouna Program

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The program is recent, which makes it difficult to evaluate any results of the plans themselves. However, it could be argued that the process alone represents a significant stride in the planning discipline. Tunisian cities have rarely (if ever) seen such comprehensive plans developed since the 1980s and 1990s. In cities previously ‘neglected’ by the national government – and in a country that historically adopted non-democratic, top-down approaches – the shift in local governance practices towards a trickle-up approach is noteworthy. Indeed, Barnett and Parnell argue “these initiatives are just the start of a process of implementing and monitoring priorities . . . that have significant potential for reconfiguring the role and understanding of local government in general and the more specific role of spatial planning” (Barnett and Parnell, 2018:25).

### 2.4.3 Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is also making its way into several Tunisian municipalities. PBs were first adopted in Gabes, Tozeur, LaMarsa, and Menzel Bourguiba as early as 2014, while the special delegations were still leading municipalities (prior to the Municipal Elections of 2018). Gafsa, Sfax, Manouba, and Raoued, as well as BenArous, El Kef, and Sbeitla followed suit respectively in 2015 and 2016 (Goehrs, 2017). Goehrs describes participatory budgeting as “an ensemble of participatory mechanisms that aim to include residents in the decision-making process defining the allocation of all or part of the resources of the collectivity,” placing them at the heart of management.

Prior to the Revolution, administrators were reluctant to involve citizens in municipal budget allocation claiming their lack of technical and administrative knowledge would create unnecessary conflicts and impede project progress (Som-1 & DeFacci, 2017). Today, it is hard to imagine a successful project that does not involve civil society in some shape or form. In an interview with the author, Khaoula Stiti highlighted the importance of citizen participation and its influence on project success. She mentioned two public park projects, one in Sidi Bouzid—where the municipality adopted a top-down approach resulting in a public park that remains empty—and one in Bargou—where participation occurred from project design to implementation. She attributes Bargou park’s success to the participatory nature of the project which involved a collaborative design process between the landscape architects, municipal advisors, and local residents, leading to a more personal appropriation of the park as a public good.

The Bargou Park project resulted from the Programme of Empowerment of Communes (PEC), a collaboration between CILG-VNG and the FNVT. The first step of the program involved training municipal actors in asset management, particularly public space

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management and programming. To qualify for the program, municipalities were required to fill out an online form reflecting a series of criteria that would allow the CILG-VNG and the FNVT to select participants. Representatives from each municipality participated in a two-week program, including site visits and context-specific management skills training. The training focused on three main goals: to raise awareness on the importance of public participation amongst municipal actors, to acknowledge and address the gender gap in many of these cities, and to highlight the region’s unique cultural assets.

The second part of the program (made possible by additional funding from the European Union) involved developing or refurbishing a municipal-owned public space. Three selected municipalities—Bargou in the Siliana governorate, Sakiet Eddaier in Sfax, and Regueb in Sidi

Bouزيد– would host these pilot projects. Sondes Zaier, a landscape architect and one of the consultants working on the training phase of the program, was given the task of designing the public spaces. Working alongside Soumaya Elkamel, a community organizer, Zaier ensured that community members were present throughout the different project phases. The sites were selected according to their strategic locations in proximity to town amenities and overall accessibility.

An interview with Sondes Zaier shed light on the overall process and reaffirmed the importance of context, communication, and participation when it comes to developing and planning a public space. As she described the projects in Bargou and Sakiet Eddaier<sup>11</sup>, key differences emerged from the onset. For instance, in the preliminary design phases, citizens were consulted via questionnaires and workshops. In Sakiet Eddaier, these events took place in the municipal building's conference room and “had a very official air to them” (Sondes Zaier, interview with author, 2021), whereas in Bargou, citizens and civil society members congregated within the site itself to discuss its future. Similarly, during the construction phase, people were more or less involved: in Bargou, the construction site was open to visitors and local residents often passed through, commenting on progress and providing additional insights; in Sakiet Eddaier, the construction site was closed off. Zaier insisted on the fact that Bargou residents were more engaged than those of Sakiet Eddaier overall and were eager to participate throughout the project, impatiently awaiting inauguration day, which was widely considered a success by citizens and municipal authorities alike.

<sup>11</sup> • The interview focused on the Bargou Park and the Sakiet Eddaier projects. The park project in Regueb was terminated when the selected site turned out not to be owned by the municipality. 31

The community members of Sakiet Eddaier needed more convincing. Unaware of the fact that international funding could only be allocated to a public space project, they complained the municipality might better serve its constituents by investing in sidewalk and waste management infrastructure rather than a public plaza. Once the project was clearly explained, several citizens were more receptive, though according to Zaier, they were not as enthusiastic as those in Bargou. With regard to context, it is also important to note the difference in size between these two municipalities: Bargou is considered a rural municipality with 5,000 residents, while Sakiet Eddaier hosts a population of over 40,000. Yet in each case, success relied on fostering trust amongst community members and including them in the process as much as possible. The appropriation of these public spaces not only determines the success of the projects today, but also their maintenance and longevity. Coordination between community members, civil society members, and municipal actors is vital in ensuring the spaces receive year-round programming and proper upkeep.

## 2.5 Implications for Municipal Planning

The examples discussed above reveal different ways in which municipalities have become ‘terrains of possibility’ nested in between the forces of international development practices and new systems of local governance (Salman & Zairs, 2019). I believe this unique position of municipalities – however precarious it may still be– is what has led to successful planning practices such as the Bargou park. Indeed, there is “a strong claim concerning the role of the city as a scale for the holistic interaction of various processes into a systematic approach to management, planning, and regulation.” (Barnett and Parnell, 2018:31)

The road to democratization and participation is not without limitations. In Tunisia, the practice is new to local governments as well as to citizens themselves. In her lecture, Salman offers an anecdote about attending a participatory community meeting. She describes the room where municipal officials and planners are about to be confronted by critical citizens making their claims.

There are three delimited seating areas for the audience, municipal administrators, and press. The room holds less than 150 seats for the public audience in a jurisdiction that counts approximately 630,000 inhabitants. The sign designating the space for the public audience reads *adhouyouf*, “guests”.

Salman argues that the citizens are not “guests” but rather active participants about to engage in what Miraftab refers to as “insurgent planning in invited spaces.” (Salman, 2019) People understand the limitations of their municipalities. They are not gullible, yet they keep showing up to these meetings, thus reclaiming their rights to their urban spaces. Whether post-revolution decentralization policies truly address citizen concerns or whether they remain vehicles for international financial institutions to perpetuate their own agendas and development models will remain a question that can only be answered in the outcomes of the projects themselves. In the meantime, rebuilding lost trust, creating more transparency, and informing citizens of their rights and roles are critical to more impactful and meaningful participation. Youth in particular, who played a key role in Tunisia’s Revolution, are among those vital participants embracing their new found freedom of expression and action.

### Chapter 3 | Youth Participation and Youth-driven Initiatives

Although youth have been to a large extent marginalized from development and decision-making processes historically, the importance of their participation and placing them at the center of sustainable inclusive development is now often highlighted in many national development strategies.

Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2017: 7

Chapters 1 and 2 focused on how global frameworks and national policies land at the local level, creating unprecedented opportunities for citizen participation in planning. The following Chapter aims to better understand where youth-driven initiatives ‘from below’ meet higher-level policies by exploring the dynamics between youth and local government efforts in the Tunisian case-study. Borrowing the critical questions posed by Bastien and Holmarsdottir in *Youth as Architects of Social Change* (2017: 11), this chapter answers: “How could the suite of opportunities for youth be improved through commitment to the global goals for sustainable development? What role can youth-driven innovation play in sustainable development efforts?” Further, I ask: How do youth intervene in the planning sphere, whether they are called on to

engage by adults for their opinions or by leading solutions and strategies themselves? Are the proper mechanisms in place to allow space for youth-leaders to embrace their role as change makers? The first section of this chapter explores some of the literature on youth in planning. The second section then examines the role of Tunisian youth during the Revolution and beyond through more recent projects.

### 3.1 Youth in Planning and Revolutionary Youth

Historically, youth have either been excluded or superficially consulted when it comes to decision-making and planning processes. Today however, it is generally acknowledged that youth represent key stakeholders at the local and global levels (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2017). As emphasized by Lee and Mirza: “An actively participating youth population is vital for development in any country” (Lee & Mirza, 2017: 100). This statement is evermore relevant in the sustainability context. For instance, while youth are not responsible for climate change today, they will be forced to live with its consequences in the future. As such, it is hardly surprising that youth activism is on the rise worldwide, raising awareness and speaking out, from Occupy Wall Street to the steps of a government building in Sidi Bouzid, or Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis (Goldberg, 2019).

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Furthering the argument to include youth in addressing global challenges and change, Bastien and Holmarsdottir elaborate the reasons to include youth in the conversation, claiming that discussions around inclusivity and sustainability “need to include current and future stakeholders and leaders, many of whom are today’s youth.” (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015: 4). They believe the involvement of youth can “increase the validity of data, by helping to contextualize issues that affect [them],” stressing that “youth can then use the knowledge gained through their experience in the research process to be change makers in their communities.” (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015: 5).

From a global perspective, the way these youth movements have emerged in the Global South, where youth innovation “develops from processes of learning by doing,” is different from their Global North counterparts, where “innovation is the result of learning through science and technology” (Morciano & Merico, 2017: 48). Tunisian youth are nothing if not action-driven, and can be similarly compared to youth in the Arab Gulf, who “are beginning to grasp concepts of social innovation and entrepreneurship in the post-Arab Spring era to meet the needs of the community that the current public and private sector are either unable or unwilling to address.”



(Lee & Mirza, 2017: 98). When and where government entities are failing to meet youth needs, young citizens are developing creative solutions to address local problems for themselves.

Moreover, both Honwana (2013) and Lee & Mirza (2017) stress the importance of an enabling environment if youth are to succeed in taking action to achieve concrete change. Grassroots movements and personal initiatives must be met with enabling policies that can alleviate the challenges of complex regulatory frameworks, access to capital to achieve their goals, and other potential lack of general resources they may encounter (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2017). Once given tools to succeed – resources and a more navigable bureaucratic structure– youths can meaningfully endeavor for successful project implementation.

Finally, to understand the Tunisian case-study, it is important to understand the impact of revolutionary contexts on youth and youth movements and distinguish the act of protest from the Revolution as a whole. Though street uprisings may come and go over time, many argue that revolutionary processes continue beyond the moment of ‘crisis’, persistently carving out a path for true reform. “After all, nothing guarantees that a just social order will result from a revolutionary change unless revolutions turn into a prolonged process of social struggle to achieve original goals.” (Bayat, 2013: 2). Across nations, youth-driven initiatives align with Bayat’s theory of ‘social nonmovements’<sup>12</sup> that are currently made possible by the same ‘passive networks’<sup>13</sup> that sparked revolutions such as the Arab Spring.

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Adding to the importance of an enabling environment just discussed, Bayat claims the degree of cohesion among youth is just as critical. This cohesion may be achieved through frameworks such as recognizable organizations (such as the UN-led SDG Camps explored later in this Chapter), but also – and perhaps more so – through the hyper local initiatives undertaken at the neighborhood level. The main difference and perhaps advantage to Tunisia’s youth-driven action with Bayat’s original theory on nonmovements is that they no longer represent extra-legal practices since the establishment of a new democracy. In the same way Bayat refers to street vendors recognizing their common struggles without ever really knowing the other, I would argue that youth recognize each other’s efforts from one neighborhood, one city, or one country to another. As regulatory barriers come down, youth have room to scale-up their initiatives and take a step closer to achieving their goals. The real question is whether local governments are able to meet youth expectations when it comes to providing them the resources and spaces to achieve those goals.

### 3.2 Tunisian Youth and the Arab Spring

The Tunisian revolution, led mainly by disenfranchised youths, was a powerful example of ‘citizenship from below’ that has emerged outside traditional political structures and has opened a space for major transformations.

### *Youth, Revolution, and Recognition*

The power of Tunisian youth reached national and global recognition as they catalyzed the Arab Spring. They were the instigators of the Revolution that swept across the MENA region, wielding the internet and social media to their advantage to overthrow dictatorial regimes and advocate for their rights (Honwana, 2013). Tunisian youth represent nearly one-third of the country's population and are among those most affected by the political and economic challenges the country faced prior to the Revolution and after. Indeed, youth ages 15 to 29 represent 72.2% of the country's unemployed population (INS, 2012) and more than 40% of women with at least a highschool degree are unemployed (INS, 2013). Obstacles ranging from difficult access to employment among recent graduates,

12 • “In general, nonmovements refers to the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leadership and organizations.” (Bayat, 2013:15)

13 • Bayat defines ‘passive networks’ as “instantaneous communication between atomized individuals which are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities directly in public spaces or indirectly through mass media.” (Bayat, 2013: 23)

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unequal access to basic services (particularly in vulnerable areas), and low participation in local governance are among some of the issues young people are grappling with (*The Tunisia We Want*, 2014).

### *Challenges Facing Youth*

Hayfa Sdiri, Youth and Innovation Programme Analyst at the UNDP, is one of the country's foremost youth leaders with over five years of experience working with fellow citizens, local governments, and for-profit and nonprofit organizations to affect social change. When asked how her work has changed since the Revolution, Sdiri begins with an optimistic statement: “Youth and international organizations are taking up more political space and are associating more political meaning to the work they do.” But soon after she adds, “Politics are becoming demystified, but the country is still operating in a deeply personified environment which creates challenges when it comes to decision-making and contributes to political and economic instability.” (Hayfa Sdiri, interview with author, 2021).

Indeed, Tunisian youth still face a series of challenges, from economic and political exclusion, to a deepening lack of trust in government institutions. Since the Revolution, unemployment has been rising among those aged 15-29 at a rate above 30% since 2013 (World Bank, 2014), leaving young people disillusioned. Despite playing an active role in

overthrowing the Ben Ali regime, youth have since been less engaged in politics. Only half of eligible citizens under age 30 voted in the October 2011 elections following the Revolution (World Bank, 2014). Further, a study conducted a year after the Revolution showed that “only 8.8 percent of surveyed rural youth and 31.1 percent of surveyed urban youth trusted political institutions.” (World Bank, 2014). “Youth [...] seem to consciously reject ‘politics as usual’ and are choosing to remain outside formal traditional political structures. Instead, they engage in civil society associations and use street protest to continue pressing for change.”(Honwana, 2013: 93).

Even though the new Constitution includes provisions specific to youth engagement requiring “political parties to nominate at least one young candidate under the age of 35 among the top four candidates on any electoral list” (Article 8 of the Tunisian Constitution, 2014), the time it takes to translate these laws into practice leaves young people in the lurch, deepening mistrust. A general sentiment from the interviews I conducted was that youth bottom-up movements are aiming to fill the gap left open by local governments. There appears to be an undeniable need for a “more constructive dialogue between Tunisia’s youth and public institutions, together with broader civil society, political organizations, and the private sector.” (Garoui, 2014: 79).

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### *Recognizing the ‘Unusual Suspects’: Youth*

Aida Robbana is a deep believer in the power of Tunisian youth and the need to integrate youth from across the country (especially from historically neglected regions) into ongoing conversations. She insists, “the unusual suspects need to be brought into discussions around sustainability and planning,” while also bringing attention to a lack of communication between young actors and their political representatives; “there is no bridge between this young population and Tunisian government.” (Aida Robbana, interview with author, 2020). Another interviewee, Rym Baouendi, echoes this lack of coordination that, in her opinion, results in “missed opportunities”: “Young people are full of motivation, they are trying to come up with ideas and take action.” (Rym Baouendi, interview with author, 2020).

Yet despite these difficulties, youth activism continues to thrive in Tunisia as youths build on the momentum initiated during the Revolution. Meanwhile, the significance of their role within the country is increasingly being recognized. In 2014, *The Tunisia We Want* Report dedicated a section to youth consultations, noting “the importance that young Tunisians be involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of policies and strategies that affect them.” (*The Tunisia We Want*, 2014: 63, translated by author). Further, since the Revolution, local municipalities, along with adopting the SDGs, have prioritized goals such as identifying what Sdiri calls the ‘positive actors’ within government institutions. For example, Sdiri points to the head of the National Youth Observatory<sup>14</sup> who is “trying hard to change the administrative

status-quo and make [the Observatory] more agile, collaborative, and push the youth agenda forward.”

### 3.3 Tunisian Youth Engaged in Global Frameworks and Local Action

#### 3.3.1 The UN SDG Camps

The UNDP Tunisia office is partnering with civil society actors to actively engage with local youth through its SDG Camps, providing a space for youth to develop their own proposals or solutions to modern urban challenges. Each Camp involves multiple workshops where youth break out into teams, develop solutions, and vote for the five most relevant proposals. In 2016, the first SDG Camps involved more than 100 young Tunisians

<sup>14</sup> • *L’Observatoire National de la Jeunesse* (ONJ), the National Youth Observatory is “a public establishment responsible for studies, information, training and documentation on young people” working in partnership with GIZ, CILG-VNG, OCDE, UNDP, and USAID among other international agencies to promote research on youth issues and uplift youth capacity within civil society, through partner projects. (ONJ, 2021).<sup>38</sup>

who developed 26 total projects. In 2017, the SDG Camps attracted 200 youth across 8 different governorates resulting in 40 innovative proposals. By 2018, the UNDP, having established partnerships with more members of civil society and public entities, engaged over 800 youth (nearly half of whom were women) across the country’s 24 governorates in 34 workshops raising awareness around sustainable development and calling for action (VNR, 2019). Further, six young Tunisians were selected among the participants to attend the The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum in New York City (VNR, 2019).

The SDG Camps are rolled out over the course of two- and three-day workshops in two phases: *Ideation* followed by *Incubation*. Youth engage in an open space and discuss the issues that matter to them. Local partners are identified beforehand and youth are invited through local associations such as YouthHub, Ennactus, Junior Enterprise, Bab18, JCI, Sistars Africa, or GoMyCode. Social media also plays a big role in spreading the word about the Camps<sup>15</sup>. Teams present their solutions to SDG-related problems according to one of three tracks: social entrepreneurship, community development, or advocacy. Then participants vote for the projects they think will be most impactful. Those five projects are followed-up, allowing the youth teams to think about how to scale their project from *Incubation* to *Implementation*.

#### *SDG Camp 2018 and SafeNess*

Selma Bel Hassine is a Tunisian youth activist. Her SafeNess project emerged from one of the 2018 SDG Camps. She proposed a mobile app for women who feel threatened in public spaces, providing them with a way to “report sexual harassment and to designate a trusted person to track their movements when they’re somewhere they don’t feel safe. There is also a

way to directly contact lawyers to get help. SafeNess will also provide videos for teaching self-defense, safe-zone maps and inform the user about the legal procedures that follow a sexual harassment report.” (Bel Hassine, interview with UN-Women, 2018).

In Tunisia, a lot of good work is happening to advance women’s rights and gender equality. There are new laws protecting women’s inheritance rights, and a law that makes it easier to prosecute domestic abuse. We even have a law against sexual harassment in public spaces. But many of these laws are not being applied in practice.

15 • Youth organizers and youth have learned to leverage the country’s high internet usage for marketing and networking purposes. According to a World Bank study, “more than any other medium, young Tunisians are using the Internet to access information,” and “more than 9 in 10 young Tunisians in rural Tunisia own a mobile phone.” (World Bank, 2014: 12).

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But having such progressive laws makes me feel more hopeful. It encourages me to make noise, because we want things to change.

When I attended a UNDP’s SDG workshop, they asked each of us, what problem we wanted to solve, what was bothering us. For us, it was sexual harassment. We are students, we all walk on the streets and take public transportation, and every day, we face sexual harassment.

Selma Bel Hassine, interview with UN-Women, 2018

Her project is being funded through the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) that focuses on women and gender equity issues. What was surprising about Bel Hassine’s experience was that she had to do her own networking to bring the project to life. The SDG Camps provided Bel Hassine with the platform to source her idea and hone her vision, but it did not provide the financing or resources necessary to bring her proposal to fruition. It was up to her to go beyond the SDG Camps and find someone to help her concretize the project.

### 3.3.2 Independent Youth-led Initiatives

As Tunisian youth take more agency in their roles as active members and creators of civil society organizations, frameworks such as the SDG Camps along with the advent of independent grassroots initiatives are as important as ever. Since the Revolution, a number of associations have sprouted addressing questions ranging from political involvement and education, the promotion of cultural heritage, the value of entrepreneurship in job creation, and to environmental sustainability. As Honwana points out, Tunisian youth “not only succeeded in getting rid of the dictatorship but also began to believe in themselves, [and] in the power of their generation, as agents of social change.” (Honwana, 2013: 82)

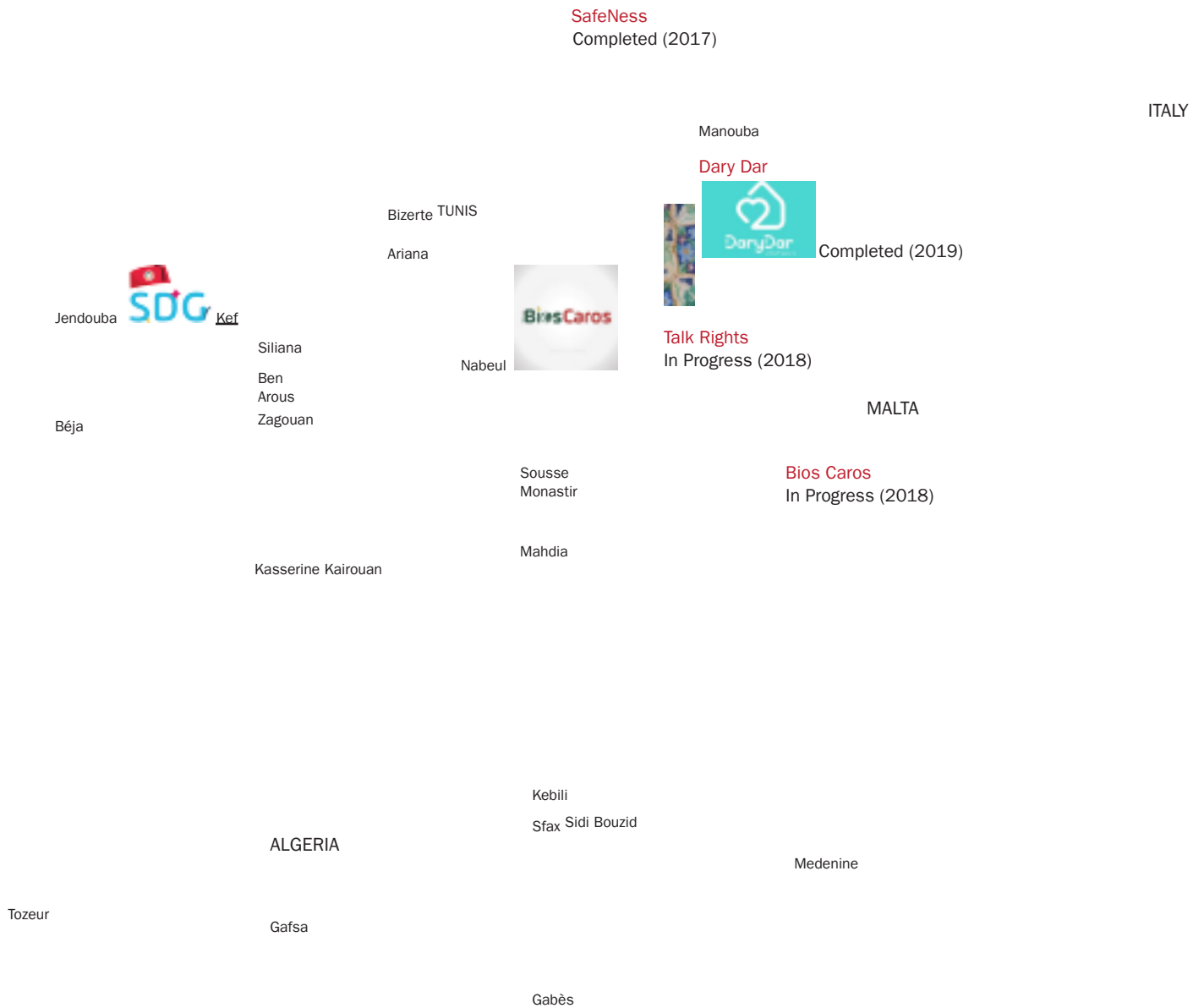
Associations such as Tounes Clean-Up launched in 2013, exemplify how youth-led action groups independently organize in the name of sustainability. Since the Revolution, Tunisian municipalities have been struggling with waste management facing barriers such as insufficient budgets, outdated equipment, and a lack of qualified personnel (Blaise, 2014). According to a WWF study, only 4% of waste is being recycled, leaving the rest to pile up along city streets and the coast (AFP, 2019). Housseem Hamdi, a young engineer, founded Tounes Clean-Up to compensate for the lagging municipal effort.

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#### Map 4: Map of SDG Camp Projects

Created by author



Tataouine

Camps

- 11 · Tunis
- 6 · Sousse
- 2 · Ariana
- 1 · Ben Arous
- 1 · Tozeur
- 1 · Siliana

LIBYA

Number of Projects Resulting from **SDG**

100 km **41** N

We are damage control. During our trash pick-ups, we chat, we exchange, to draw people's attention [to the issue].

Housseem Hamdi, interview with Africa Green Magazine, 2019

The first clean-up days in 2013 attracted 10 to 15 people each weekend. Today the organization counts hundreds of volunteers who participate in recycling initiatives along the coast and in forests. The association's active Facebook page churns out images from past Clean-Up initiatives and other video content daily. Beyond the physical clean-ups, their goal is to raise awareness of recycling and sustainability efforts by showing examples of activism from other countries or how plastic waste is destroying the oceanic ecosystem.

### *Patrimonia 2.0*

Khaoula Stiti, a young architect currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Carthage, is working on the implementation of participatory approaches in planning policies and processes, especially in built heritage management. After completing her architecture degree in Tunis, she worked with several local NGOs focused on built heritage as well as with the FNVT and CILG-VNG, planning activities around urban public space management. Stiti's most recent project involves the creation of a mobile app dedicated to democratizing the management of built heritage by inviting citizen collaboration. The participatory map-based app allows users to mark points of interest in their neighborhood and provide both technical information about the state of historic buildings and the stories and histories behind them. (Stiti, interview with

author, 2021).

The main funder behind Stiti's project is Wallonie Bruxelles International (WBI), an international cooperation agency based in Brussels. A pilot version of the app is already being tested in historic neighborhoods in Belgium and is set to be launched in the center of Tunis shortly. Stiti mentioned that she receives some technical and logistical support from Tunisian NGOs like the Association for the Preservation of the Medina (*Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina*) or the National Heritage Institute (*Institut National du Patrimoine*), but notes that even these organizations are more focused on the buildings within the Medina of Tunis itself rather than the endangerment of historic European buildings immediately adjacent to it (Stiti, interview with author, 2021).

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### 3.3.3 Youth, the Operating Environment, and the Importance of Communication

Stiti then further describes the role that international organizations play in these types of local development and planning projects, highlighting the complex dynamics between project leaders, funders, and municipalities. Echoing my interview with Sdiri, Khaoula confirmed that more youth are reflecting on their role as citizens and are eager to participate, but that there is a gnawing disconnect between citizens and projects that are externally funded and implemented without community involvement. Both Stiti and Sdiri describe an operating environment where trust runs low between citizens and their local governments as well as between local governments and international funding institutions (IFIs). Municipalities and local actors alike withhold information from one another to ensure their own interests and agendas are met. Sdiri explicitly states that “successful examples [of youth input and participation] that I've seen are the ones that involve local leaders and local NGOs, not international agencies or other IFIs.” (Hayfa Sdiri, interview with author, 2021).

This lack of trust means youth are less likely to participate in decision-making processes even when explicitly called upon to do so. This further exacerbates a reality where, as Robbana astutely note, “there are two systems running in parallel”(Aida Robbana, interview with author, 2020). On the one hand, an institutional system is making efforts to include and integrate youth, but that often falls short on meeting their needs. On the other hand, grassroots initiatives often lack the resources necessary to bring projects to fruition. The successful examples portrayed earlier in this chapter are the exception rather than the rule. Rym Baouendi believes “things aren't progressing fast enough because even the level of good intention we see from youth is not enough.” Despite their motivation, many youth-driven projects are



short-lived (particularly if developed while they are still students) and not sustained in the long-run – whether due to a lack of resources or lack of interest from city stakeholders – that lead youth to “move on” (Rym Baouendi, interview with author, 2020).

To remedy the challenges youth are facing, to ensure their voices are heard, and to create a more inclusive operating environment for youth, there is one thing every single one of my interviewees mention: the importance of communication. The persistent lack of transparency from certain municipal and political actors, which leads to a lack of confidence and trust at the community level, are a hindrance to successful project implementation. Rebuilding that trust will be critical to achieve more impactful participation and more impactful projects.

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### Insights: Planning Futures in Post-Revolutionary Contexts

From global frameworks and their implications for local communities, to shifts in municipal planning policy and the advent of grassroots organizations engaging youth, this research has shown the complex operating environment and stakeholder dynamics that spur and determine planning outcomes in post-Revolution Tunisia.

Conducting this study five years into the initial adoption of the UN SDGs worldwide offers a reflection on the path traveled thus far and how global frameworks unfurl at the local level. From generalized and incomplete to technical and comprehensive, the global policy shift from the MDGs to the SDGs has tangibly changed the number of targets, their conception and key indicators, as well as their nature. Most importantly, the recognition of cities and citizen participation as keys to SDG attainment by 2030 provides a roadmap toward more successful, sustainable, and inclusive planning projects and outcomes. In Tunisia, the adoption of the goals coincided with the new 2014 Constitution and new laws regulating planning and participation. By embracing and integrating the SDG framework into national planning strategies, such as in the PQD and PQRs, Tunisia’s governing institutions are recognizing the important role of planning for and with the communities they serve.

As an emerging democracy in the Global South, the Tunisian case study also provides valuable insights into city-making practices from South-South and South North learning perspectives. The post-Revolution decentralization policies have led local leaders to question the necessity and adequacy of the typical top-down approach. Where previously municipalities discounted citizens’ opinions for their presumed lack of expertise, they now recognize the value of participatory inputs and design. Though new municipalities are still struggling with a lack of financial, technical, and human resources, several have proven that successful project implementation can occur even with limited resources. Recognizing the lag in the

decentralization process, one must not underestimate the significant strides municipalities have made since the Revolution in becoming ‘terrains of possibility’ nested in between the forces of international development practices and new systems of local governance. Though the road of democratization is not without its limitations, rebuilding lost trust, fostering transparency, and maintaining accountability are critical to more impactful and meaningful participation. It is no coincidence that municipalities are conveniently located at the intersection of the global and the local, making them the ideal spaces where citizens can voice their concerns and be heard.

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As this research focused on Tunisia, it is impossible not to address the question of youth in planning since youth continue to be active players ever since the Revolution. Planning journals and articles often discuss how to conduct engagement with youth but rarely focus on how youth themselves act as “self-starters” who develop their own innovative city-making strategies in attempts to forge a better future for themselves. The subject of youth in planning is gaining long-overdue recognition and traction. This research sheds light on the role of Tunisian youth in contemporary city planning and how they can effect measurable change, while also considering their role globally where transnational networks allow youth to learn from one another and from frameworks such as the SDGs.

Throughout the research and interviews, emerged a mixture of hope and doubt with regard to the post-revolutionary context Tunisians must navigate. Some may argue there is a long road ahead before meaningful and impactful participatory practices can take place. With the recent pandemic, attaining the global goals by 2030 seems evermore difficult (even unlikely). Global goals, revolutions, and decentralization policies all take time to achieve. As planners, it is our role to explore and highlight theories of planning and planning practice in ways that can inform urban solution-building. By questioning the status-quo, we can develop new ways to create better cities and places that meet society’s needs. Where most research studies focus on a single one of the aforementioned topics, the different projects explored throughout this thesis demonstrate how intertwined the global, national, and local scales truly are. I believe continuing to bridge the gaps across these levels will lead to better cities and places that serve the very communities that live in and breathe life into them.

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## Appendix A *Interviews*

### Semi-structured Interviews

The choice of interviewees strives to cover the three levels of the research: global, municipal, and grassroots. The goal is to better understand the dynamics and crossovers across these different planning layers in order to fully grasp how they interact and influence one another. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a more open ended discussion and yielded snowball results with introductions to other important stakeholders and organizations in the field.

### List of Interviewees:

Rym Baouendi, the founder and Managing Director of Medina Works, a strategy and design consultancy helping public, private, and third sector organizations with crafting impactful urban strategies while engaging a wide variety of stakeholders, particularly youth, to

advance the SDGs.

Leila Ben Gacem, is a social entrepreneur and multi-specialist. She is a city council woman in her home city of Beni Khalled in the Nabeul Governorate. She is also the founder of Blue Fish consulting, through which she facilitates improvement of culture and financial dynamics with a focus on heritage preservation and job creation. Leila also founded Dar Ben Gacem Boutique Hotels (social enterprises located in century old restored homes) – and Dar el Harka, a cultural hub and co-working space, all in the Medina of Tunis.

Aida Robbana, Program Specialist at the UNDP Tunisia office, in charge of all coordination surrounding SDG integration and Innovation. She has helped spearhead the UN SDG Bootcamps.

Salim Rouhana, is a Senior Urban Development and Resilience Specialist and Task Team Leader at the World Bank, where he has worked on the Middle East and North Africa, and East Asia regions. He has spent the last several years in Tunis working on the Urban Development and Local Governance Program and another country program dedicated to Resilience and Recovery.

Hayfa Sdiri, Youth and Innovation Programme Analyst at the UNDP Tunisia office. She is a recent graduate of Paris-Dauphine University with a Bachelor of Applied Science in Business Administration and Management and has been working with the UNDP for three years as a youth advisor and facilitator, raising awareness of the SDGs across regions.

Khaoula Stiti, was the Public Space and Urban Management Project Manager for the PEC – a local governance and decentralization program initiated by the FNVT with the support of the CILG-VNG. She is currently pursuing her PhD at ULB and UCarthage focusing on the design and implementation of participatory approaches for the (re) appropriation of material and immaterial heritage in Tunisia within the framework of the P@trimonia 2.0 web-based initiative.

Sondès Zaier, is a landscape engineer, doctor of Landscape Sciences and Architecture. Worked at the Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes. She is the landscape engineer behind the design, but also the participatory activities, of the commune of Bargo public park.



## Interview Questions:

### *Introductory Information*

- Where do you currently work (public sector, private sector, non-profit)? Please share a little bit about your role and current position.
- How many years of experience do you bring to [insert specifics about the role or affiliation]?

### *Experience related to youth, urban planning, and the UN SDGs*

- How has your work changed since the 2011 Revolution?
- How has your work changed since the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- In your experience, are many community members aware of Tunisia's commitment to the UN SDGs?
- In your experience, how does public participation influence policy and project implementation at the city or neighborhood scale in Tunisian cities?
- How is your organization involved in advancing the country's goals for sustainable development?
- In your experience, what are some of the key concerns community members have when it comes to the built environment and urban planning initiatives in their cities?
- Are there areas of community engagement that are more worth pursuing than others?
- What do you think of

the role that international organizations play in local development and planning?

- What are the best ways to engage with and elevate the work that youth grassroots organizations are pursuing?

### *Experience related to Public Engagement and Planning*

- How has your work changed since the 2011 Revolution?
- What are some of the priorities that local municipalities have elevated since the Revolution and the adoption of the UN SDGs?
- What are some of the ways local municipalities are providing channels for public input and participation?
- In your experience, how does public participation influence policy and project implementation at the city or neighborhood scale?
- Do you feel that community members are more engaged in the planning process?
- In your experience, what are some of the key concerns community members have when it comes to the built environment and urban planning initiatives in their cities?
- How do you think these points of view differ from one city to another?

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### *Experience related to the UN SDGs*

- How has your work changed since the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- What are some of the priorities that local municipalities have elevated since the adoption of the UN SDGs?
- In your experience, what are some of the key concerns community members have when it comes to sustainable development in their cities?
- Who at the local and/or state level is championing projects and policies in pursuit of the UN SDGs?
- Do you think the UN SDGs are realistic and attainable in Tunisian cities? Why?
- To the best of your knowledge, what role do international organizations play in the development of planning policies at the local level?
- How do you envision the communities you serve becoming an increasing part of the planning process?

### *Experiences related to Youth and Planning*

- Have you participated in the UN SDG Camps workshops before? • Why do you think the UN SDGs are important?
- Do you feel the voices of youth-driven groups such as [insert name of organization] are being taken into consideration during municipal decision making processes? • How do you garner support from your peers?
- How do you garner support from local government?
- Who would you say are your main supporters? Who are your biggest adversaries (if any)?

- Do you feel that youth are adequately informed about planning policies and projects? • What are your recommendations for improving planning processes in your city or neighborhood in the future?
- What else do I need to know about youth driven action happening in Tunisia right now?

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## Appendix B

### Notable UN Summits and Frameworks

#### Conference, Summit, Assembly

Date	Event	Location	Outcome
1992	Earth Summit	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Habitat III Quito, Ecuador <i>Resulting Framework</i>
1996	Habitat II	Istanbul, Turkey	Agenda 21
2000	Millenium Summit	New York, NY, USA	Millenium Development Goals
2002	World Summit on Sustainable Development	Johannesburg, South Africa	Millenium Development Goals Istanbul, Turkey
2012	UN Conference on Sustainable Development	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Millenium Summit New York, NY, USA
2013	General Assembly	New York, NY, USA	Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and the Plan of Implementation
2015 - Jan - March	69th General Assembly	New York, NY, USA	Open Working Group
July - Sept - Dec 2016			2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- Oct	UN Sustainable Development Summit	New York, NY, USA	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development

Paris Agreement on Climate Change

New Urban Agenda

*source: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>*

## Appendix C

*Table 3 : International Organizations, Focus Areas, and Example Projects*

Table 3

Table 3





































































Youth-driven action, participatory planning, and the  
attainment of Sustainable Development Goals in  
Tunisian cities

Zeineb Sellami  
Columbia University GSAPP 2021