

Dignity and ‘Decent Work’: Youth Unemployment in Tunisia Isn’t Just About Jobs

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Introduction

Our research explores the employment preferences and expectations of Tunisian university students and graduates. What drives their preferences and expectations? Preferences and expectations are important because they shape employment choices that impact how, or whether, youth participate in the larger society. Tunisia has some of the highest unemployment rates in The Middle East. This has many consequences that have implications for Tunisia's future. Migration, extremism, and "waithood" have been identified as responses to unemployment. These consequences, however, are also related to the expectations young Tunisians have. We found the perspective of youth, from their point of view, under represented in the literature. We argue greater attention should be given to youth perspectives on employment to optimize program design and encourage youth engagement.

Preferences and expectations are important because they shape choices that impact how, or whether, youth participate in the larger society. Youth unemployment in Tunisia isn't just about jobs. For young Tunisians, employment means access to and participation in the larger society. The ability to provide for oneself, to get married and to start a family are important aspects of inclusion in society that depend on having a job.

There are many consequences of youth unemployment and these have implications for Tunisia's future. Tunisia's progression toward democratic transition can be seen in political developments like drafting the new constitution and, more recently, debates over equal inheritance rights. But these political gains are overshadowed by economic challenges and youth unemployment is the most pressing of these challenges. Responses to unemployment include migration, 'waithood,' and radicalization. Barriers to inclusion caused by unemployment have critical consequences for Tunisia's democratic transition and its future.

Unemployment was one of the main drivers of the 2010-2011 revolution. Tunisia has some of the highest unemployment rates in the Middle East, especially among those with a university degree. Some reports estimate that unemployment rates among university graduates are as high as 50 percent. In some parts of Tunisia, youth unemployment estimates approach 85 percent.¹ University students played a critical role in the revolution, demanding 'dignity' and 'decent' work. This aspirational aspect, the demand for dignity and 'decent work' is at the core of our research, as they relate to expectations.

Youth unemployment has not improved since the revolution and many say conditions are worse. Due to instability, decreased economic activity, and global economic decline, the youth unemployment rate as of 2017 was five points above its 2011 level across North Africa.² ILO estimates show youth unemployment in Tunisia at 29.4 percent in 2010 and 34.8 percent in

¹ "Investing in Youth: Tunisia: Strengthening the Employability of Youth during the Transition to a Green Economy" (Paris: OECD, 2015), 21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264226470-en>.

² Ghada Barsoum, Sarah Wahby, and Aditya Sarkar, "Youth and Employment in North Africa: A Regional Overview" (Geneva: International Labour Organization, September 2017), 4.

2018.³ Many looking for work are becoming disillusioned with the promises of the revolution. Disillusionment is not only on the rise, but reports indicate this is feeding into radicalization. The Soufan Group observed a disproportionately high contribution of Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS, with 6,000 of 30,000 total fighters coming from Tunisia as of 2015.⁴ Inactive youth, those who are neither employed nor in school, are increasingly susceptible to recruitment by an extremist organization. Some have argued that the promise of higher education combined with unmet expectations for work breeds ‘frustrated achievers’ and aggravates propensities for radicalization.⁵ While youth radicalization is not our focus, it warrants mentioning because the aspect of unmet expectations relates to our research.

During the course of our research we learned that some university graduates are passing up on employment opportunities that are available because they do not line up with their preferences or expectations. Many go through a period of ‘waithood,’ remaining unemployed for years, at times more than ten years, waiting for a job that fits their preferences or expectations. This runs counter to what we would expect for a demographic facing such high unemployment.

In response to high unemployment, development programs have been directed at improving skills and opportunities through providing training and career services. Our research indicates that youth unemployment in Tunisia is not just about job opportunities or skills. Preferences and expectations are also important factors that shape employment choices. How young people view employment prospects, what their preferences and expectations are, and the values they hold for work are important factors that ultimately shape choice. These choices regarding work impact youth engagement in the larger society. This not only impacts the level of engagement within the country, but many graduates are leaving Tunisia for opportunities abroad.

We argue greater attention should be given to youth perspectives on employment to optimize program design and encourage youth engagement. Incorporation of youth perspectives, from their point of view, is critical because they are the most important actors facing these challenges. Yet, their point of view is not well-represented in the literature. We think this is a missed opportunity to engage young Tunisians and we think their perspective should have a larger share in discussions on employment and development of program design.

We will begin by examining the literature and existing research on youth unemployment in Tunisia and the MENA region to position our findings within the broader theoretical framework for approaching this issue and provide the backdrop and factors contributing to a larger issue throughout the region. We will discuss our methodology for conducting research, the limitations we encountered, and present our findings as they compare to the existing literature and research. We will then provide an analysis of our findings in relation to existing research and literature.

³ “Unemployment, Youth Total (% of Total Labor Force Ages 15-24) (Modeled ILO Estimate),” The World Bank, n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS>.

⁴ “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq” (The Soufan Group, December 2015), 5, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf.

⁵ Omer Taspinar, “Fighting Radicalism, Not ‘Terrorism’: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined,” *SAIS Review* XXIX, no. 2 (2009): 75–86.

Finally, we will summarize our conclusions as they pertain to the future of youth unemployment in Tunisia and discuss the potential for further research.

Literature Review

While the research available on unemployment in the post-Arab Spring Middle East is comprehensive, there is a gap when it comes to accounting for the perspectives and preferences of job seekers themselves. Discussion largely centers around job creation and factors leading to slow economic growth and reform, as much of the literature constitutes bank reports that approach the issue from a development perspective. There is also a gap in research focusing on Tunisia specifically, with most reporting reflecting broader trends throughout the MENA region. There has been less of a focus on Tunisian university graduates, with much of the reporting focused on youth who lack education and subsequently face unemployment. Reports indicate that Tunisians are becoming increasingly educated as part of the government's wider effort to include more youth in the higher education system. Young job seekers are shifting their employment preferences and expectations to match their education level. Our research attempts to fill in the gaps by focusing on the perspective of university graduates, the demographic with some of the highest levels of unemployment in Tunisia and across the Middle East.

An OECD Development Centre "Mind the Gap" report analyzing youth perspectives and realities around employment in developing countries provides a useful framework for our research. One of the major findings of the study was that employment opportunities frequently do not align with the expectations that young job seekers have for employment. In such countries, available jobs do not meet the aspirations of the youth, demonstrating that it is not just the availability of jobs but the quality that matters.⁶ According to the report, most students prefer public sector jobs and desire highly skilled professions. Unlike most of the literature on this topic, this report prioritizes youth perspectives on employment opportunities. It suggests that young job seekers must shift their expectations to fit what is available in the market and that governments must also work to improve the quality of available jobs to better suit job seekers' preferences while guiding students' aspirations to fit what is available in the market.⁷

A report by the International Labor Organization on employment trends in North Africa also supports the finding that the quality of jobs is just as important to job seekers as is their availability. Youth desire jobs that align with their education levels, and underemployment and holding out for public sector jobs have resulted from this mismatch.⁸ The report also highlights the misalignment between the education system and job market, as the education system has produced increasing numbers of graduates but the labor market has not kept up. Disparities are exacerbated in rural areas and for women.

A number of surveys of Tunisian youth provide useful insight into this topic. An Arab Barometer survey reflects the view that many Tunisians are concerned with the effectiveness of the

⁶ "Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap," Development Centre Studies (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017), P.9, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264285668-en>.

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Barsoum, Wahby, and Sarkar, 3.

education system in the country but see the government as adequately addressing the unemployment issue. They see value in supplemental education programs that are outside of the formal structure due to perceived shortcomings in the public system.⁹ The survey reflects a preference among students for an educational approach that emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking skills over memorization, contrary to beliefs that rote memorization is the preferred method. They see the development of social and emotional skills as more important than simply focusing on academic achievement and favor an approach that allows students to think for themselves and ask questions.¹⁰

A major theme throughout the literature is dissatisfaction with the education system and misalignment between the skills students gain from their education and those required by employers. The World Bank IFC report, *Education for Employment: Realizing Arab Youth Potential*, considers youth perspectives on education and employment from across the region. The report notes that roughly one-third of students believe their education has not prepared them for employment and that many were not aware of what employment opportunities may be available after graduation. The report also notes a lack of awareness of the correlation between certain disciplines and attaining gainful employment. In other words, these perceptions are held without examining their merit in terms of statistics or actual employment outcomes.¹¹ A youth survey contained in the same IFC report asked which skills students thought were most critical in securing a job. Soft skills such as leadership, work ethic, and problem solving were ranked low despite employers ranking these as important qualifications.¹² This suggests a disparity between students' perspectives and their employers' needs.

Another survey, *Youth Perceptions: Employment and Employability*, provides insight into the challenges that youth in Tunis' periphery are facing, a demographic we were unable to capture in our field work. The findings show that these youth rely more heavily on government services when looking for jobs and are often not very familiar with what is available in the labor market. These individuals feel that their education has prepared them for employment, but little value is paid to soft skill development.¹³ They see education as the ticket to employment and believe that because they are educated, they will be prepared for a job, however this is not necessarily the case. Another key finding is that these youth have high expectations for employment and hope to secure high-skilled jobs and decent salaries. Finally, many hope to emigrate to another country to work rather than looking for work in Tunisia.¹⁴ Compared with educated youth in Tunis, they

⁹ "Views of Youth Non-Formal Education in Tunisia" (USAID, August 2017), 2, http://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Tunisia_Public_Opinion_Survey_2016_Education.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-10.

¹¹ "Education for Employment: Realizing Arab Youth Potential" (International Finance Corporation, April 2011), <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/1a854480482cc759a513edd1c8896efa/e4eReportFinal.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Youth Perceptions: Employment and Employability" (ISAMU International, 2016), https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/342c47_aea083892eb949c2af19981afa87a623.pdf.

¹⁴ Ibid.

seem more hopeful that the government will assist them in finding employment and seem to have mismatched perceptions about their preparedness for the labor market.

A theme that has frequently come up in the literature and that is central to the challenges this demographic faces is that of *waitthood*. Diane Singerman introduced this concept in the context of the Middle East, arguing that educated youth are waiting passively for jobs. Alcinda Honwana has conducted research throughout Africa on this concept and makes a different argument. She asserts that youth are not passively waiting for employment but are actively looking to create new spaces.¹⁵ In her research, she uses the term “*waitthood*” in reference to waiting for social adulthood, a milestone that is delayed when young people cannot gain economic independence, establish families, and become taxpayers. As she explains, this *waitthood* becomes a liminal space between dependence and independence. However, unlike Singerman’s findings, Honwana found that youth are looking for creative ways to develop their identity and engage with society. In Tunisia, youth use the term *débrouillage* to imply “making due,” which reflects a sense of improvisation. Individuals in this situation make due by engaging in the informal labor market, turning to entrepreneurial pursuits, or trying to migrate.¹⁶ Contrary to other findings in the literature, Honwana asserts that today’s youth are not simply waiting for the government to improve their situation. Instead, they are taking matters into their own hands both through everyday struggles and national protest movements.

The literature related to our research is comprehensive, spanning regional and national economic and political perspectives, but this scope has limitations in assessing factors that are applicable to our specific demographic of interest. Literature specific to Tunisia and focused on youth preferences is sparse. Social and cultural expectations are another area that play an important role in shaping in the preferences young, educated job seekers develop, and the literature does not generally address this element. Our research aims to fill the gaps in the literature by placing the perspectives of this demographic at the forefront.

Methodology

The methodology of this research draws heavily on the frameworks of the OECD Development Centre Studies report, “Mind the Gap,” and the regional surveys in the IFC report, “Education for Employment: Realizing Arab Youth Potential.” We looked at reporting from the ILO’s School-To-Work-Transition surveys in the OECD report and the survey questions from the IFC survey report to gain macro and micro perspectives on how the issue of unemployment was being approached in the field. One of the findings in the OECD report was that 80 percent of students in 32 developing or transitioning countries preferred to work at levels 1 to 3 of the ILO’s Structure of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) and that few students desired work in intermediate-skilled occupations (ISCO 4-8).¹⁷ ISCO categories 1-3 are designated for occupations like doctors, lawyers, and public officials. ISCO categories 4-8 are designated for occupations like clerical, technical, and vocational occupations and work in the

¹⁵Alcinda Honwana, “Youth, Waitthood, and Protest Movements in Africa” (June 28, 2013).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap,” 12.

trades. We looked at the ISCO when designing our interview questions to ensure that we asked about a variety of jobs reflecting these categories.

We also looked at reporting in the Arabic language on unemployment of university graduates, to learn what has been discussed locally and regionally in the media on this topic. Several of the articles discussed the unrealistic expectations youth have compared with the employment realities in Tunisia. Many accounts revealed that the education system was not meeting graduate expectations in leading to a job. One of the things we asked in our interviews is how well students and graduates thought their education prepared them for a job.

We then talked to professionals and representatives in Tunisia who were working in different capacities related to youth unemployment. To gain perspective on the unemployment issue from the employer side, we spoke to a representative from an international private employment and recruitment company that specialized in matching candidates with jobs abroad. We spoke to a young Tunisian aspiring to open her own vocational training center, which provided us with valuable insight into some of the challenges of starting a business and the barriers to gaining financing and resources. She discussed the stagnation in the private and government sectors that are encouraging entrepreneurial enterprise. We talked to a representative from an NGO that does work in public universities and vocational centers on projects to address the skills mismatch between universities and the job market. We spoke to the director of a private vocational institute to get a private sector perspective on career development and program design. We talked to a research specialist focused on Tunisian youth working in the informal sector, which gave us valuable insight into how the informal sector engages youth as a consequence of the high unemployment rates in the private and public sectors. We spoke with a private company that performs opinion and survey research to gain a perspective on what working in the field was like in Tunisia. We talked to a public official from a provincial part of Tunisia to gain a public sector perspective. This interview was also helpful in providing a perspective from an area of Tunisia outside of Tunis, where our research and fieldwork were focused. We spoke to an engineer and educator who gave us valuable insight into how employment issues have changed from before and after the revolution. Finally, we talked with a USAID representative involved on the international development side. This discussion provided us with valuable insight as to what goes into designing a program and the types of programs that are working on youth employment.

All of the above was used to shape the context of and inform questions for our interviews with graduates and university students. The interviews were focused on three areas: what are the employment preferences and expectations of graduates and students? What drives them? What implications do they have? We asked what disciplines students studied in, where they went to school, and what part of Tunisia they were from. To understand their preferences, we asked which employment sector was most desirable (public, private, or entrepreneurial), which types of jobs they considered more desirable and less desirable, and what skills or attributes they considered most important in landing a job. To get at what drives preferences and expectations, we asked about incentives in choosing a job/field (status, salary, job security, having the right skills, or training opportunities), and what has the greatest influence on shaping job choices (parents/family, educators job market, or career counseling). To learn more about the implications of these preferences we asked whether they would leave Tunisia for employment, if they would accept a job that was outside of their preferences/field of study, whether they would

be more inclined to accept jobs that were “less desirable” if they were outside of Tunisia, and if they would accept a job that was “less desirable” if it were available to them and if it offered a higher salary.

The field work was conducted in Tunis between March 13 and March 20. The interviews conducted with professionals and representatives were unstructured and open-ended; the interviews with students were semi-structured and designed to encourage open response and discussion. Initially we planned to visit universities in Tunis to conduct focus groups or distribute surveys, but we found the process for doing so was more involved than our time in Tunisia allowed and that we needed to take an alternative approach. This adjustment proved to work in our favor because we ended up engaging students in a less structured and more informal way. Instead of engaging them at their respective schools with faculty and administrators as intermediaries, we were able to engage a variety of students freely in the American Corner, an open area for studying and activities, at the AMIDEAST location in Tunis. To encourage participation, we maintained the integrity of the groups students were socializing in. For example, if there was one student sitting alone, we interviewed that student independently; if there was a group of students, we engaged the students as a group. At first, we had reservations that this group context might influence the responses with some students deferring to others, but this was not the case. There was a variety of opinions expressed and there did not appear to be any hesitation to express different views or to disagree with what other colleagues were saying.

We encountered several limitations in carrying out our fieldwork. We conducted all of the interviews in Tunis due to time constraints. The literature points to a large disparity between the prosperous coastal regions of greater Tunis and the rest of the country. Despite this limitation, we found a fairly good cross-section of students who were from different parts of the country and who were studying in different programs and in different fields of study. We reviewed a study on youth perspectives focused on the periphery areas of Tunisia outside of Tunis to see where our findings might differ substantially from research conducted outside of Tunis.¹⁸

The field research has a small sample size. Our field work consisted of 31 interviews, 10 with professionals serving as educators, administrators, and representatives, and 21 interviews with university graduates and students. Fortunately, we were able to get a decent cross-section of students studying in private and public institutions and pursuing fields ranging from architecture and engineering to literature and law. Although the interviews were conducted in Tunis, many students were from outside of Tunis, from places like Sfax and Gafsa.

All of our interviews were conducted in English. Due to time constraints and complications with getting a translator, we were unable to carry out interviews in the local Arabic dialect or French. All of the NGO employees and other professionals we talked with spoke English, so it did not necessarily pose a barrier in this way, but we were only able to interview English-speaking students, which meant that our interlocutors might be from more privileged backgrounds. This also could skew the research regionally toward graduates and students that are more internationally oriented. This would have implications for the willingness to migrate among our participants.

¹⁸ “Youth Perceptions: Employment and Employability.”

While these limitations preclude comprehensive findings, the fieldwork provides some insight into factors shaping youth perspectives and expectations. Its value is in its focus on the youth perspective and in questions for further research.

Key Findings:

Before conducting our field research, we expected that our findings would match many of those laid out in the OECD report and IFC report surveys. We thought our contribution might offer more detail due to our emphasis on graduates and university students in Tunisia. While we did find many similarities, we also found some key differences.

1. Students have a preference for entrepreneurship over employment in the public or private sectors. While the OECD paper found that most students preferred to work in the public sector, over three-quarters of our participants stated that they would prefer to work as entrepreneurs over taking jobs in the public or private sectors. This was based on their response to a question that asked about which of the three sectors is most desirable to work in: public, private, or as an entrepreneur. This view was also supported with very positive commentary on owning a business, even if it is in a field that is considered “less desirable,” such as plumbing (see finding 3).

2. Soft skills are very important in having the right qualifications for work. Most of our respondents said that soft skills such as motivation, leadership, interpersonal skills, and teamwork are very important qualifications for work. This does not match up with the findings of the IFC report surveys, which demonstrated a larger importance placed on hard skills like computer literacy, languages, and specialized training. Some of our participants placed soft skills such as leadership and critical thinking at “average importance,” but the majority described these as highly important.

3. Most students reported a desire to work in high-skilled occupations; few desired work in intermediate-skilled occupations. This is not surprising for a demographic with higher education, but we found that this is also related to a stigma associated with not attending university and ending up in a vocational or intermediate level job as a consequence. Our findings aligned with those of the OECD paper in this area, but we posed a different question. Similar to the IFC survey, rather than ask which job students wanted to pursue and categorize this with within the ISCO framework, we asked our participants to rate a variety of jobs from from “high level” (categories 1 - 3) and “intermediate level” designations (categories 4-8).¹⁹ Students consistently rated jobs in categories 1-3 as “most desirable,” with doctors, lawyers, and engineers at the top. “Less desirable” jobs were in clerical, technical, vocational, and trade areas. This

¹⁹ “Structure of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08),” International Labor Organization, n.d., <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco08/index.htm>.

ranking changed however, when participants said that a “less desirable” job would be desirable if they owned their own business. We did not specifically ask whether owning one’s own business changed their preferences, rather many of our participants offered this as a qualifying comment while rating jobs as more desirable and less desirable.

4. Preferences for (or aversions to) jobs do not apply if the job is taken abroad. As a follow up to our question about more desirable and less desirable jobs, we asked if the student’s classification of a job changes if the job is taken abroad. The overwhelming response here was yes. All except one student said they would accept jobs considered less desirable outside of Tunisia. The reasons students gave were that social perceptions that look down upon lower skilled occupations in Tunisia would not apply if they were abroad and that the pay would be better in places such as Europe.

5. Societal views toward employment drives employment choices. One of the major drivers for employment choices is how a given type of work is viewed socially and culturally. Many students reported that vocational and trades jobs such as an electrician or a plumber were not perceived favorably by society. All of our participants said that if Tunisian society had a different view of vocational and trades jobs this would impact job choices and preferences and students would willingly enter these fields. The social stigma is such that students will opt to remain unemployed rather than take an “undesirable” job.

6. There is a high desire to leave Tunisia to work or study. Nearly all participants said they would leave Tunisia for work. Some added that they would plan to return but all said they would go abroad at least for a period of time. Many also said they would take a job that is perceived as less desirable if it were abroad and the pay was decent.

7. Opinion on whether education adequately prepares students for employment is mixed. We received a variety of responses as to whether students felt their education prepared them to enter the workforce, leading to inconclusive results in this area. Some students unhesitatingly reported that their education absolutely prepared them for the workforce while others said no outright. A handful reported that it prepared them in some ways or “fifty-fifty.” A few students expressed the view that education provides students with tools but that there is generally too much theory and not enough application. The diversity of responses we received to this question likely relates to a student’s area of study. One student said that for doctors and teachers, education properly prepares students, while another student said that it does for law.

8. Students generally feel it is their responsibility to find jobs, rather than wait for more job creation. Most of the students expressed the view that reducing the unemployment rate is the responsibility of both the government and graduates. Contrary to the perception that unemployed youth are content to wait years for a public sector job that aligns with their preferences, a number of our interlocutors held the opinion that unemployed youth should not behave as victims, rather they should work hard, taking jobs while they wait or becoming entrepreneurs and creating jobs for others. At the same time, they also reported that the government could do more to improve the economic situation.

9. No career services are offered in the educational system. This corresponds with reporting in the literature and all of our respondents confirmed this. We asked if they had any career services and where they received their guidance from. Many said their parents or family, but many also said the job market was a major determinant of their choices. Our participants said they got their information from the internet and social media. We did not expect this with so much of the literature pointing to a lack of awareness of what opportunities existed, and this leaves room for a future research project in this area that probes what students know about work opportunities and where they get their information from. One individual we spoke with at an NGO insisted there are many public programs that students do not know about, especially those outside of the Tunis area.

Context

Unemployment has been a long-standing problem across the Middle East and North Africa with roots in the 1980s and 1990s when populations grew considerably but economies did not keep up. Due to conflicts, weak private sectors, and country-specific issues, the Middle East now has the highest rate of unemployment among youth in the world, and Tunisia is no exception to this crisis. Following the Arab Uprisings between 2010 - 2011, Tunisia has been considered a relative success with the most promise for democratic transition. While the realization of this promise has been hampered by several integral factors, the rising unemployment rate, particularly among those with university degrees, remains among the most pressing issues. About 30 percent of young Tunisians are unemployed, and among those with university degrees, that number reaches 40 percent according to some estimates.

While economic issues certainly play a role in the pervasive unemployment, much of the problem stems from a mismatch between the education system and opportunities available in the labor market. Tunisia has one of the most expansive education systems in the MENA region due to the ‘massification’ and government investment toward wider inclusion of more Tunisians in the higher education system. This system produces a high number of university educated individuals, but the Tunisian government has failed to provide jobs to the increasing number of graduates.²⁰ Tunisian university graduates looking for jobs have historically favored public sector employment due to the stability, decent pay, and benefits these jobs offer. However, in recent decades and even more so since the revolution, the public sector has not been able to meet the demand for jobs that is produced by the increasing university graduation rates. From the interviews we conducted our findings indicated university educated job seekers are considering options other than the public sector.

Misalignment and Disconnect between Education and Employment

A significant factor contributing to the high rate of university educated individuals who are unemployed is the misalignment between the skills and training the education system provides students and the needs of the labor market in Tunisia. University curricula have historically emphasized hard skills and rote memorization; soft skills such as communication, leadership, and critical thinking, skills that private sectors employers maintain are essential in the workplace, are

²⁰ Barsoum, Wahby, and Sarkar, 6.

not part of the curricula. This theme came up in our interviews with NGO employees working on this issue. One NGO we visited targets this mismatch by providing programs and trainings within universities to help students with professional development and to develop soft skills, areas that are not emphasized in university curricula but which students we interviewed consistently ranked as among the most important in securing a job. Universities also fail to provide job search training or career counseling, adding to the difficulty students face when trying to obtain employment. Of all the students we interviewed in Tunis, none reported ever receiving any form of career counseling, saying that any information they had in this area they found online.

Much of this issue results from a complete disconnect between educational institutions and employers, the source of the skills mismatch. The universities still focus much of their training on the skills required by the public sector, yet there are very few jobs available in the public sector for graduates. Due to the “massification” of the higher education system, the Tunisian population is becoming more educated than ever, and with higher education levels comes higher expectations for employment. While university attendance was previously viewed as nearly guaranteeing a public sector job, this is no longer the case due to economic challenges. In light of this shift, universities need to adjust their curricula and coordinate with employers to ensure that they are properly equipping students for what is available in the job market. One participant joked that the ministries of education and employment are located right next to each other, yet they do not work together or coordinate their efforts. Universities have been disconnected from the labor market. As one expert explained, changing the curriculum in Tunisian public education takes years and involves a lot of red tape; this has allowed for the emergence of private institutions to improve the lack of connectivity. As the Education for Employment report points out, it is necessary that the skills young people develop match those that the labor market is demanding. If students are not able to graduate and obtain a fulfilling, stable job, the education system has not fulfilled its purpose.²¹

The disconnect between the educational curricula and the labor market is also related to institutions. A report on reforming Arab education from “schooling to learning” found that schools are “designed to use specific academic material, and as a result, teachers are encouraged to impart lower-level cognitive skills (recall and comprehension) at the expense of higher-level ones (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and critical thinking).”²² Other reports show that while educational curricula may not prepare students for the job market, they aren’t designed for this either. They are designed to prepare students for public sector jobs. One report underscores the preference for public sector jobs and the willingness for graduates to wait for public sector employment. With increased graduates and relatively fewer public sector jobs, these expectations do not comport with the reality of employment opportunities that are

²¹ “Education for Employment: Realizing Arab Youth Potential,” 21.

²² Muasher, Marwan, and Nathan Brown. n.d. “Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education: From Schooling to Learning.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Arab Horizons, [.https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/engaging-society-to-reform-arab-education-from-schooling-to-learning-pub-77454](https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/engaging-society-to-reform-arab-education-from-schooling-to-learning-pub-77454).

available. At the same time, the institutional focus to “train implicitly” for the public sector means that graduates’ qualifications do not match those of private sector employers.²³

Job Satisfaction and Well-Being

Another frequently overlooked element of employment is job quality, which includes salary, time spent working, and job security. As the OECD study highlights, unemployment is a major source of dissatisfaction and lack of well-being.²⁴ As risk of unemployment and length of time spent unemployed increase, well-being decreases. In a country like Tunisia where around 30 percent of youth are unemployed, this has a detrimental effect on quality of life for an entire generation. At the same time, there are certain elements of employment that positively correlate with satisfaction. Self-employment, if by choice, leads to higher satisfaction due to job flexibility and greater independence. The preference for self-employment was a common theme in our interviews with students, affirming that it is a desirable option as opposed to the other options available to them. Likewise, low-skilled jobs, those that our interview participants ranked as “least desirable,” equate to a lower level of job satisfaction. Working in the informal sector also corresponds to lower job satisfaction, likely due to undesirable working conditions and lack of stability. Job security is another important factor in job satisfaction. Those who are uncertain as to how long they will be employed at a given job are much less likely to feel satisfied, and those with an unlimited job contract have higher satisfaction levels than those in a temporary job.²⁵ A skills mismatch is also shown to correspond with dissatisfaction in the workplace, especially when it results in underemployment. Those who feel overqualified for their jobs are more likely to report feelings of dissatisfaction. Underemployment has also been a major consequence of the economic situation in Tunisia, as education levels and employment expectations rise but the labor market fails to keep up.

Self-concept factors and the Educational System

Self-concept is closely tied to job satisfaction. Self-concept factors refer to a person’s self-view in relation to the social structures and society in which they live with particular emphasis on family characteristics, socio-economic status, and academic performance.²⁶ Consistent with the OECD report, our findings indicate that self-concept factors play a significant role in shaping employment preferences and provide the general framework for these preferences. In a couple of interviews with professionals, social aspects of the education and employment systems were discussed at length. In the educational system in Tunisia, a student’s score on the baccalaureate exam in high school determines their access to higher education (and presumably a job) in certain fields. Students with higher scores attend university in formal specialized fields or in higher skilled fields, while students with lower scores attend vocational schools targeting

²³ Haouas, Ilham, Edward Sayre, and Mahmoud Yagoubi. 2012. “Youth Unemployment in Tunisia: Characteristics and Policy Responses.” *Topics in Middle Eastern and African Economies* 14 (September), 400. http://adapt.it/adapt-indice-a-z/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/haouas_sayre_yagoubi_youth_employment_in_tunisia_2012.pdf.

²⁴ “Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap,” 31.

²⁵ “Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap,” 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

medium skilled training. This system sets up a social ranking within society that translates into the perceptions that those working in medium skilled jobs did not do well in school and are second class citizens. This perception was also supported by an unsolicited comment in the interview we had with an employment agency representative, who said candidates would be destined for service and vocational jobs if they were “not good” in secondary school.²⁷ Other interviews mentioned this distinction between good and bad students and the correlation with the those of jobs they are in.

Preference for High Skilled Jobs and Jobs in the Public Sector

Based on the OECD estimates 80 percent of students desire employment in “high skilled” occupations as lawyers, doctors, and engineers, that few students desired work in intermediate skilled jobs such as clerical, vocational, or trades jobs and that only 1 percent desired jobs in the agricultural sector.²⁸ Our interviews supported this estimate at about 80 percent of students preferring high-skilled jobs. This should not come as a surprise, however, because presumably, if a student is enrolled in higher education, the student is more likely to pursue jobs that would fall into higher skill categories. A distinguishing aspect of this preference has to do with societal value places on certain jobs associated with high skill as opposed to the attributes of the job itself. This preference is related to the self-concept factors within a societal context and the historical association between high academic performance and high social status. Being in a high-skilled position reflects to others and to society that you were “good” in school. “Bad” students, however, go to vocational training. This social aspect has factored into choices for many of those who could get a vocational job quickly to hold out because of the stigma associated with having done poorly in school and having a vocational job as a consequence.

Our findings indicate the prospect of going abroad for work changes the perspective on this. Many of the high skill jobs an intermediate skill job corresponded to more desirable and less desirable ratings by the students, respectively. The majority of participants said they would accept “less desirable” jobs if the opportunity is abroad and they indicated there is a clear difference on how work is perceived at home versus abroad. As one researcher we talked to put it, you can take less desirable work abroad “because there are no friends or family to see you working in a low status job.”

Reporting on the unemployment in the developing world and in the region has consistently indicated a strong preference for public sector jobs. The same school to work transition surveys indicate there is little interest in the entrepreneurship or self-employment with the report concluding, “ in Africa, with the exception of Egypt, the prevalence of youth entrepreneurship exceeds by far the share of young people wishing to become self-employed.”²⁹ This was not the result we had. A clear majority said working as an entrepreneur was most desirable.

An interesting aspect to this that came up in commentary is that some students said that even if the nature of the job was considered less desirable, working as an entrepreneur would mitigate and social stigma associated with a less respectable occupation. For example, when we asked

²⁷ Interview conducted with employment agency representative in Tunis, March 13, 2019.

²⁸ “Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap,” 21.

²⁹ “Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap,” 9.

students to rate jobs such as an electrician or plumber, nearly all said these occupations are less desirable unless they owned their own business in these trades.

An engineer we talked with who graduated through the public education system explained that even though technical or vocational jobs may offer higher salaries, the social status for these jobs is lower than that of a public sector job.³⁰ Another explanation for the preference for public sector work is what our participants described as “stability” and what we would call “job security.” Public sector jobs offer health and retirement benefits and it is very difficult to be fired from these positions. Some of our participants described public sector workers as lazy and having a poor work ethic. This has to do with a lack of accountability. The reason for this perception can be seen in media reports on one of the most prominent state companies, Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa and its employment of “ghost employees” who receive salaries but do not work and spend most of their time at cafes. Many of these employees were recruited to ‘buy peace’ in the face of protests stemming from unemployment issues.

Working in the Informal Economy

Our research and interviews did not generally cover work in the informal sector, but we touched on this topic in an interview with a researcher working in this area. In the context of public sector work preferences, she explained that some students will work in the informal sector while they wait for public sector jobs. Informal economy jobs offer fewer benefits and lower pay than those in the private sector. When we asked why individuals would not work in the private sector while waiting for the preferred public sector jobs, she explained that jobs in the private sector have social security benefits and that if a graduate receives a social security number, they will be excluded from further consideration for public sector jobs (for first-time jobseekers). Many of those waiting for public sector job will declare themselves as “job seekers” with the state employment agency while working in the informal economy.³¹

‘Waithood’

As outlined in the literature, ‘waithood’ refers to the period of time, sometimes years, in which young people are suspended between youth and adulthood due to lack of jobs and economic advancement opportunities. Diane Singerman studied this phenomenon in the context of the Middle East, finding that despite higher levels of education, young people are unable to get jobs, gain financial independence, and marry, leading to widespread frustration.³² Alcinda Honwana has furthered this research throughout Africa, and adds that youth are not waiting idly for jobs but are creating their own opportunities.

The OECD report underscores the imbalance between the preference for public sector jobs and the plausibility of actually obtaining one such job. For example, the study reports that overall among the 32 developing countries, 57 percent of students favor the public sector but just 17 percent will actually work in this sector. “Job queuing” and waiting for work in the public sector has been a consequence of this imbalance, factoring into waithood.

³⁰ Interview conducted with engineering professional in Tunis, March 18, 2019.

³¹ Interview with NGO research specialist, conducted in Tunis, March 19, 2019.

³² Honwana

One NGO representative we spoke to discussed the concept of “waithood” with us, noting that many young people are in their thirties and unmarried. Since they are unemployed, they cannot afford to get married, stalling adulthood. This factors into a person’s ability to lead an independent and dignified life. One graduate expressed dismay with the system in Tunisia, saying “I didn’t find a professional job for more than 12 years, during which time I worked as a waiter in a café, a builder and a farmer,” said Salem Ayari, 39, secretary-general of the Union of Unemployed Graduates. “I had to find a job to sustain myself after I realized my certificate in Arabic was worthless and wouldn’t qualify me for a decent job after all the effort I had exerted during the past years.”³³

Many university graduates spend a period of time waiting for employment. Most accounts average around five years but many of those we interviewed commented on longer wait times, as long as 15 years. In the same interview we had with the NGO representative, he explained that youth perceive public sector jobs as part of a continuum of the system. For those that go through the system and complete their program, they see it as the government’s job to find them employment in those fields. They followed the path the government carved out for them, they got their “score,” and they did the hard work of finishing their studies. They see it as the government’s job to place them in their rightful occupations. We got the opportunity to speak to a public official from a province outside of Tunis about this perception. He explained that in his region, there is a lack of development compared with the wealthier parts of Tunisia like Tunis and the coastal areas. Most of the jobs that are available in his region are in agriculture and people who go through the education system do not want this type of work. Some of the thinking behind waithood is reasoned to the likes of ‘I was made to study this field based on my score, so I now deserve a job in my field that reflects my level of education.’³⁴

According to the youth we talked to, the family takes care of those who are waiting for their public sector opportunity. When we asked about the family’s willingness to take care of youth while they wait for employment, especially over an extended period of time, one participant said, “what does a young person need? Just some coffee, some cigarettes. They are not that demanding.” The students we spoke to reported that their parents would not have a problem with them living at home while they waited for a job, even if it took years. In most cases, parents would prefer this to their child taking a low-skilled, undesirable job due to the social stigma this may incur.

The concept of waithood also tied into responses we got regarding the greatest incentive young job seekers felt in choosing a job or career path. While answers to this question varied, stability, salary, and having the right skills came up the most. One student stated that having the right skills is most important, as money or stability will not matter otherwise. She is implying that without the skills employers want, students will not be able to get a job in the first place. It is unsurprising that stability and salary were ranked high, as these have historically been the main elements behind the desire for public sector employment and remain important.

³³ Ibtissem Jamel, “Without Jobs, Dignity Eludes Many Tunisian Youth,” *Al-Fanar Media*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2015/10/without-jobs-dignity-eludes-many-tunisian-youth/>.

³⁴ Interview conducted with NGO representative in Tunis, March 15, 2019.

There are a number of broader implications for society that occur as a result of waithood. Limited opportunities in rural areas have contributed to high levels of migration to urban areas, yet employment options remain slim in cities. Informal employment has also increased, as people who can find jobs in the formal sector turn to this alternative.³⁵ Migration is also a very desirable option, as those who are educated and cannot find viable employment in Tunisia chose to go elsewhere if possible. This “brain drain” has become a significant consequence of unemployment and the resulting waithood since the revolution. Ten thousand engineers have left Tunisia in the past three years, and the number of doctors going to Europe or the Gulf has nearly doubled in recent years. Officials hope it is not a “brain drain” that is occurring but that young professionals will gain experience abroad and then return to Tunisia. To counter the migration trend, employers have had to increase their efforts to attract youth, making the workplace more appealing and following laws that they may not have before.³⁶ Finally, social engagement has become a response to waithood, as young people join civil society organizations, political parties, and even engage in protest activities.

Responses to Unemployment and Stagnation: Migration, Extremism, Entrepreneurship

With disappointing opportunities for employment due to systemic failures, young Tunisians are looking for alternatives. Migration, extremism, and entrepreneurship represent three alternatives young Tunisians entertain in response to high unemployment, and these all have very different outcomes and implications for the future. Our findings show that migration receives a unanimously positive response among students, with nearly all reporting they would move abroad for job opportunities. This was true in the small focus group that was held at a private vocational institute as well as the separate interviews we had with students. One employment agency representative spoke to us about the types of candidates—both with and without experience—the employment agency attracts. This employment agency matches candidates with employers abroad, especially in the Gulf and Canada and other Western countries. She explained the employment situation in Tunisia is worse now than before the revolution, and the presence of an employment agency such as this demonstrates the high desire Tunisians have to move abroad. Many of the agency’s candidates would accept lower salary jobs in the service industry if it provided the opportunity to move abroad. From her observations, stability was more important than salary. Perhaps more important were programs at establishments like McDonald’s that offered upward mobility through training programs after starting at the crew level. Most of the candidates—about 75 percent seeking work abroad—were male and about 80 percent were from the Tunis and Northern Coastal areas. The interest in training opportunities was highlighted in a few of our interviews.³⁷

Extremism was not a topic we included in our fieldwork nor did we discuss it in any of our interviews, but it is an important consequence of the lack of economic opportunities our demographic of focus faces. This trend is well-represented in the literature. In one person’s

³⁵ Honwana.

³⁶ “Tunisia Looks for Ways to Stem ‘Brain Drain,’” *Focus* (France 24, January 18, 2019), <https://www.france24.com/en/20190118-focus-tunisia-brain-drain-graduates-doctors-engineers-work-move-abroad>.

³⁷ Interview conducted with employment agency representative in Tunis, March 13, 2019.

account, “Many young men see only two choices presented to them for self-fulfillment and success: flee to Europe, or fight in Syria.”³⁸ The frustration and disenchantment that result from unemployment and exclusion pushes young Tunisians to go to these measures. Going to fight in Syria, for example, represents an alternative emigration trend. The number of young men who go to Syria is disproportionate in comparison to the population of Tunisia and to other countries in the region. This reflects the frustration and dissatisfaction these youth feel due to the situation in their country. Joining a terrorist organization provides them with a sense of purpose and fulfillment they lack from their unemployed status in Tunisia. They see leaving Tunisia as their only viable option, whether that is through employment opportunities abroad or through extremism.

The findings from our fieldwork comport with Alcinda Honwana’s take on the “active” rather than passive response to waithood and unemployment, but our findings show that the interest in entrepreneurship is especially relevant. Entrepreneurship represents an alternative route in a society that has traditionally favored a linear path from education to employment, usually in the public sector. This alternative shows a potentially positive aspect of the predicament young Tunisians face and might explain why the students overwhelmingly chose this as the most desirable among the three sectors. This view is represented especially in the willingness to accept “less respectable” jobs in cases where the occupation is an entrepreneurial endeavor. Despite the desire for this there are many challenges for unlocking entrepreneurship in Tunisia.

Challenges for Entrepreneurship

Despite the desirability of entrepreneurship, there are barriers that stand in the way of youth pursuing their own business ventures. As we heard from a few of those we interviewed, it is difficult to get loans from banks, and those wanting to start their own businesses can get money for supplies but not other expenses such as paying salaries. There are programs such as USAID’s Mashrou3i, or “my project,” which facilitates the process of starting a business by providing technical assistance, training on how to create a business plan, and courses related to entrepreneurship. It targets those between ages 18 and 35, and 43 percent of its start-ups are women-led. It has allowed for the creation of over 200 businesses within Tunisia and created over a thousand jobs.³⁹

Much of the hardship of starting a business stems from red tape in the financial sector and difficulty accessing financing. A governor we interviewed from a provincial area reiterated that it is difficult to get loans without a good business plan. He commented on loan guarantees and the disparity between the coast and interior as far as opportunities that are available to youth in entrepreneurship. He believes that providing improved infrastructure in the interior of the country will provide opportunities to youth, especially in the region he is from which is mainly agricultural. He mentioned that young women from rural areas (as young as 12 and 13 years old) are often sent to Tunis to do house cleaning to provide for the family income.

A young woman we spoke with who was beginning her own vocational training center reiterated the difficulty of this process, mentioning that she had sold her car and some other possessions to

³⁸ “Youth Perceptions: Employment and Employability.”

³⁹ “What Is Mashrou3i?,” Mashrou3i, n.d., <https://mashrou3i.tn/en/what-is-mashrou3i/>.

get the money to start her business.⁴⁰ Programs like Mashrou3i sponsored by USAID show great promise in seeking to unlock entrepreneurship opportunities for young people. This program fast tracks aspiring entrepreneurs through giving them access to fast-track financing and providing training. Programs like this show potential to engage young Tunisians and to build the necessary infrastructure. Perhaps more entrepreneurship will provide opportunities to disadvantaged youth such as the young women being sent into the city to provide domestic services.

The Startup Act is one of the new reform measures being undertaken to unlock youth entrepreneurship as part of the government's "Digital Tunisia 2020" strategy. In an effort to broaden Tunisia digital infrastructure 64 private-public partnerships are under development. The regulatory aspects discussed about still present and obstacle, but the new strategy calls for reforms that will expand access to funding and resources needed to start a business.⁴¹

Changing Attitudes

Despite long-held perceptions about certain employment trajectories and biases against vocational work, we heard in multiple interviews that attitudes are changing. The director of a vocational training school that we talked with told us that attitudes have been changing over the past five years in favor of a private training such as this one rather than attending university. This is desirable as a shorter period of study is needed (two years instead of three) and as the director stated, "companies want professionals, not diplomas." Attitudes toward attending this type of center have shifted - while attending a training center would previously have been for students who failed high school, it is now a viable option. More students are graduating high school and choosing to go to a training center due to the opportunities it provides and the practical training they receive.⁴²

This ties into a broader shift from students waiting for the government to provide them a job to looking for solutions on their own. One interview participant expressed the view that if the government does not provide jobs why wait? Others expressed a willingness to take less desirable jobs in the interim; in discussing waithood one of the participants said "the government should do more but people should also take jobs... (they should) ...work and protest."

Conclusion

Our research was directed at learning more about what drives preferences and expectations among young Tunisians with higher education. We found that youth unemployment in Tunisia isn't just about jobs, that expectations and preferences are also important. We found that the drivers of these have to do with ideas about dignity and decent work that are shaped by institutions and social outlooks. Dignity and decent work relate to self-concept factors and expectations for work. These aspects are subjective and are best expressed and explored through discussion and engagement. They cannot be captured in employment statistics or economic graphs or surveys. We believe the perspectives and expectations of young Tunisians will provide

⁴⁰ Interview conducted with young aspiring entrepreneur in Tunis, March 13, 2019.

⁴¹ Katrin Sold, "The Tunisian Startup Act" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 26, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76685>.

⁴² Interview with director of private vocational institute conducted in Tunis, Mach 14, 2019.

a contribution to employment discussions and development program design because young Tunisians are the most important actors facing unemployment challenges and their perspective matters. Their perspective can be useful making job opportunities that are available more appealing by taking their preferences into account. The literature we came across underscored the disparity between youth expectations and the reality of the job market, implying that these expectations need to be changed to better fit with realities. We are suggesting that these expectations should be engaged not necessarily to change them, but to discuss whether they still fit with the changes young Tunisians want and what kind of future they want for Tunisia.

Our research aims to place youth perspectives and preferences at the forefront through discussions with university students and professionals working on issues around unemployment. A lot of research has been done on unemployment in the Middle East, but little centers young job seekers' perceptions and experiences. Our interviews yielded results that aligned with the literature in some ways and differed in others. The literature largely maintains that educated, young Tunisians prefer public sector jobs, but our student interlocutors repeatedly reported that entrepreneurship was the most desirable path. This was followed in most cases by public and then private. We found that few students would take a lower skilled job, even while waiting for a more desirable job, but this changed if they owned their own business or if the job was overseas. Societal perceptions frequently came up as a limitation, as students felt that they would be looked down upon for taking a lower skilled job or pursuing a course of study that was in a humanities or social science field as opposed to medicine or law. A handful of students reported they would take a seemingly less desirable job anyway, as they valued financial independence over how others may see them.

Our research and field work indicate that youth perspectives and expectations should be central to the conversation on unemployment. We found an opportunity to improve program design to better target this issue. We looked at development programs working on youth employment. We asked professionals and representatives if they asked students about their perspectives and expectations. They reflected on what they had heard or observed from students and graduates, but we learned this inquiry was not central to program directives. We found most of the programs to be focused on training and skill acquisition or providing career services, but not centered on student perspectives and expectations. We asked professionals and representatives if they asked students about their perspectives and expectations. They reflected on what they had heard or observed from students and graduates, but we learned this inquiry was not central to program directives. We found an opportunity to increase youth engagement to fill this gap.

We discussed many consequences of unemployment such as 'waithood' and migration. Their significance lies their implications for inclusion. Preferences and expectations are important because they shape choices that impact inclusion in the larger society of a country that is going through democratic transition.

The interest in entrepreneurship is significant because it signifies that Tunisian youth want to create their own opportunities. The opportunity for youth engagement can be seen through the positive response we received to our research. We received willingness and enthusiasm to participate in our interviews that exceeded our expectations. One public representative offered to facilitate a survey on our behalf in his province. We were also invited to conduct more

interviews at one of the spaces where we interviewed. All of the participants took an interest in discussing this issue and in sharing their perspectives and opinions.

Perhaps the most rewarding part of our experience came from a phone call we received on the national independence holiday as we were leaving Tunis. A young woman we interviewed, who was studying neuroscience in a second advanced degree program offered to facilitate more interviews and to arrange a meeting at the national library for students to discuss their perspectives and thoughts. She said, “I like this very much...I like this discussion very much...we should be talking about this.”

This tells us that not only do these young Tunisians want to create opportunities, but that this is a conversation they would like to have.

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