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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND THE JUST TRANSITION IN TUNISIA

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About the study

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Cover photo: Tunisian farmer Nafti Nabli cultivates corchorus olitorius, a plant whose leaves are used to cook mulukhiyah, a traditional soupy dish in Tunisia. Gabes, Tunisia - August 2017.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The Tunisian revolution of 2011 was the result of decades of economic inequality and social injustice. The unequal distribution of wealth – combined with the neoliberal policies and austerity regimes enforced by international financial institutions – created an increasingly unstable situation and led to social unrest. The impoverishment of the peasantry and the working class, together with misguided agricultural reforms that increased the price of several foodstuffs and the marginalization of the country's interior, were the main reasons for much of society's dissatisfaction with the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.[1,2] Underlying this crisis was the regime's farm policy, which favored large-scale agriculture over small-scale farming and engaged in land-grabbing practices. In fact, it was the frustration of Tunisia's rural poor that sparked the uprisings, which first began in the regionally dominant farming governorate of Sidi Bouzid, progressing through rural governorates before finally breaking into cities and ultimately the capital. This trajectory highlights that while demands for political freedoms were a factor, social and economic issues, and in particular rural ones, lay at the source of the unrest.[3]

In the post-revolution period, however, political and identity-based concerns have saturated discourse and policy, overshadowing the agricultural and rural dimensions that drove the initial rebellion. Neither government policy nor any political party platforms have addressed agricultural and rural issues comprehensively, as evidenced by the continued application of imported paradigms of agricultural development.[4] In contrast, civil society organizations (CSOs), progressive researchers, and unionists are increasingly recognizing the centrality of agriculture in the implementation of development policies; they are increasingly inclined toward the international movement around the rights of people in rural areas, as well as toward climate issues and green transition.

This report intervenes in this space by deepening the discussion around how food sovereignty could be realized in the Tunisian context. The study asks: How can Tunisia meet the interconnected challenges of climate change, globalization, and national governance to transform its agrifood system to a more sustainable and just system? It offers an original examination of Tunisian food systems and comprehensive analyses of existing governance and policy frameworks. It also broadly highlights the crucial contributions of unions, activists, and civil society, which have not been explored to date. This approach uncovers unique opportunities and challenges to implementing food sovereignty in Tunisia and highlights innovative areas for policy change that can contribute to a sustainable and inclusive agrifood system for Tunisia, particularly considering the escalating climate crisis.

2. Concepts and Methodology

Applied to the agrifood system, the concept of just transition refers to a shift to a more sustainable, equitable, participatory, and resilient food system. First conceptualized in reference to energy transitions in the context of the global climate crises, just transition in the context of food indicates the move to practices that contribute to lower greenhouse gas emissions, preserve natural resources and biodiversity, ensure apportionment of benefits among marginalized groups, and guarantee social equity and economic justice. Through a just transition lens, the agrifood system must embrace: sustainable forms of agriculture that minimize the environmental footprint of food production; a model of governance that guarantees participation through inclusive spaces and decision-making mechanisms; and the establishment of a sustainable and fair-trade exchange.

1 Radl, Sascha. "Structural Adjustment in Tunisia: The Crisis of Neoliberalism and the 'Gafsa Riots' of 2008", In: Gisela Baumgratz, Khaled Chaabane, Werner Ruf and Wilfried Telkämper, *The Impact of the European Union's Neoliberal Agenda on the North African Countries*, Peter Lang, 2017.

2 Gana, A. "The Rural and Agricultural Roots of the Tunisian Revolution: When Food Security Matters", *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 19, no. 2 (2012) (Gana, "The Rural and Agricultural Roots", 2012).

3 Elloumi, M. *Tunisie: agriculture le développement compromis*, Editions Nirvana, 2018 (Elloumi, *Tunisie*, 2012).

4 Elloumi, *Tunisie*, 2012.

Transnational social movements like La Via Campesina (LVC) advocate for this kind of deep shift, demanding that food systems prioritize social, cultural, and political concerns – including power relations and democratic governance – over purely technical adjustments like high-yield agriculture reliant on GMOs, large-scale irrigation, advanced machinery, and chemical inputs. As defined by LVC, food sovereignty is a comprehensive framework that goes beyond simply producing food by involving social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological dimensions to reach a fundamental transformation of food systems that prioritize the rights and needs of people and communities over the interests of transnational corporations and markets. Food sovereignty, as articulated by LVC, is an appropriate analytical framework for understanding current struggles while proposing a new vision for the just transformation of food systems, particularly in the Arab region.

The findings of this report emerge from a mixed approach that combines: a thorough review of the primary and secondary literature on the agrifood system in Tunisia; an in-depth analysis of the governance system and agricultural policies; and qualitative data collected through formal and informal stakeholder interviews as well as roundtables. Seven formal interviews were conducted during April and May 2025, both online and in person, aiming to capture perspectives on Tunisian agricultural policies and their impacts, especially on small-scale farmers. The goal was to document different viewpoints, narratives, and interactions among key players, informing a more inclusive dialogue about creating a sustainable agrifood system.

To complement the interviews, the author, along with other researchers and staff of the Arab Reform Initiative, held two validation roundtable discussions. The first roundtable ("Farmer Group") took place on 8 April 2025 in Kairouan, a critical agricultural region. This session specifically targeted small-scale farmers, local unions, mutual agricultural service societies (SMSAs), agricultural development groups (GDAs), local civil society actors, and local media. The second roundtable ("Civil Society Group") was held on 18 April 2025 in Tunis, engaging national-level civil society, researchers, media, and unions. Approximately 20 people attended each round table. In both events, preliminary findings were shared, and critical discussions with a diverse group of stakeholders were facilitated. A snowball sampling technique was used to select participants, leveraging the author's network to include diverse voices from civil society, academia, trade unions, government, and media. The observations, recommendations, and key themes from both roundtables and interviews are fully integrated into this report.

3. Unpacking Tunisia's Agrifood System

3.1. Tunisia's Farms and Farmworkers: Basic Facts

Tunisian agriculture is characterized by a diversity of production models that fall into four major farm types:

- Subsistence farms produce a minimum income, either in money or in kind, to meet basic household requirements, often supplemented by insecure sources of outside income.
- Family-run business farms provide employment and regular incomes for some portion of the family labor force; they tie farm operations to familial structure and aspirations, including interdependent production and consumption patterns.
- Employer farms are rooted in the family farm model but distinguished by their greater reliance on non-family workers and increased capital inputs, primarily of family origin.
- Capitalist or entrepreneurial farms are profit-making farm enterprises that include state-owned enterprises and large private farms; they are widespread in the livestock, fruit farming, and aquaculture sectors.[5]

Tunisian farmers are also conventionally divided into three categories based on their land holdings:

- Small-scale farmers, who own less than 5 hectares, represent 54% of farmers.

5 Elloumi, ***Tunisie***, 2012, p.19.

- Small- and medium-scale farmers, who own between 5 and 10 hectares, comprise 75% of farmers and collectively own approximately 25% of the agricultural land.[6]
- Large-scale farmers are those who own more than 10 hectares. It should be noted that farmers who own more than 50 hectares represent only 3% of farmers, but own 34% of the agricultural land.

Thus, the Tunisian agriculture sector is characterized by a sizable percentage of small and medium-sized farms and an unbalanced distribution of land ownership between differently sized farms.

Female farmworkers are invisible, with scarce data available. Until 2017, only 44,000 farmers were women compared to 438,000 male farmers, or 8% of the farming population. Female farmworkers constitute 70% of the workforce of small farms, where they deal mainly with livestock rearing and food preparation, crafts, managing house responsibilities, and childcare. Even though contributing approximately 80% of agricultural production, women manage only 6.7% of farms and own only 5.6% of the land due to patriarchal inheritance laws and traditions. Female farmworkers also earn less than their male counterparts: only 33% have social security, and only 10% of rural women have access to free healthcare. Furthermore, female farmworkers and rural women have limited access to training and are extremely underrepresented in agricultural organizations.[7]

3.2. Mapping the National Agricultural Governance Structure

Tunisia's agricultural sector is centrally governed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries (MARHP), which oversees all aspects from policy formulation and legislation to resource management and institutional support. The MARHP manages water resources, agricultural infrastructure, and natural resource preservation, while also strengthening agricultural institutions, guiding land reforms, supporting professional associations, and managing regional agricultural development. Beyond its administrative role, the MARHP controls strategic commercial operations through entities like the Office des Céréales for grain collection and import and the National Oil Office for olive oil export and other oil imports. It also coordinates closely with the Ministry of Trade and Export Development for monopolies on imports like rice and sugar.

Locally, the MARHP operates via regional commissariats for agricultural development, which focus on resource preservation, agricultural technique dissemination, and production promotion. Agricultural extension and professional training for workers are globally managed by the Agency for Agricultural Extension and Training under the MARHP's supervision and in collaboration with the Ministry of Professional Training and Employment.

Agricultural research is advanced through collaborative efforts between research institutions, higher education, and producers, facilitated by bodies like the Institution of Agricultural Research and Higher Education. The National Observatory of Agriculture, an independent information institution under the MARHP, provides crucial data and analysis to inform decision-making and strategic planning for stakeholders.

Finally, the MARHP directly supports the agricultural private sector through its supervision of the state's Agricultural Investment Promotion Agency, which promotes private investment in agriculture, fishing, and related services by facilitating international partnerships and offering incentives, project development assistance, and entrepreneurial training.

Thus, the Tunisian agricultural governance structure and the decision-making process is top-down and centralized around the MARHP. Initiatives, directives, and decisions are drawn up by the MARHP and its institutional instruments described above. Even if local commissions are consulted, questions about the level of engagement of local authorities and civil society remain.

Professional agricultural organizations, such as the SMSAs and GDAs, take part in the agricultural governance structure. The SMSAs are private cooperatives formed to provide essential farmer services, while the GDAs are key bodies in the

6 Jouili, M. "Olive Oil and Water: Moving towards sustainable agricultural trade between the EU and Tunisia", in Examining Agricultural Trade Between the EU and North Africa in Times of Crisis. Issue Brief n°1, Transnational Institution, 2023 (Jouili, ***Olive Oil and Water***, 2023).

7 Jouili, ***Olive Oil and Water***, 2023.

collective management of resources and rural water access. While the SMSAs have a cooperative structure that does not exclude a commercial role, the law prevents the GDAs from carrying out commercial activities. However, the SMSAs are plagued by bureaucracy, sectorial over-dependence, and regional concentration, while also lacking members, being financially troubled, and having management deficiencies. The GDAs are also undermined by administrative limitations, lack of government support, indebtedness, and historical political manipulation, which are further worsened by corruption and technical expertise shortages.[8,9]

Within this centralized governance structure, farmers are mainly represented by a central and dominant union, the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP), which receives significant state funding and has the largest membership of any agriculture union. Rather than reflecting genuine member engagement, however, the UTAP's influence is partly attributed to its gatekeeping role in granting farmers access to state subsidies and loans.[10] In fact, to gain such access, Tunisian farmers must hold the professional title of "farmer", which is granted exclusively by the UTAP. According to the UTAP, its status as the sole representative body for the agricultural profession allows it to organize farmers and to leverage its strong bargaining power in decision-making circles to obtain benefits for farmers.[11] The UTAP strives to ensure farmers' rights, including access to inputs and land, fair sale prices, stable income, and improved profitability, especially for small-scale farmers.[12]

Yet the strength of this Tunisian farmers' union lies not only in its standard-setting role, but also in its leading role in policymaking. First, the UTAP provides an almost unique link between Tunisian farmers and key ministries, notably the ministries of agriculture, trade, and industry, all of which regularly consult it during policy formulation to ensure smoother implementation and farmer buy-in. In addition, the UTAP plays a monitoring role, relying on its regional branches for rapid and representative monitoring, and then relaying farmers' challenges to the MARHP and proposing solutions. Although the MARHP sometimes makes unilateral decisions that have a negative impact on farmers, the UTAP claims that it systematically strives, through communications and official interventions, to influence these impacts, ensuring that farmers' voices and needs are integrated into the political process and mitigating the negative effects of centralized decisions. Through its access to all decision-making circles, and regardless of its ability to propose policies, the UTAP has no competitors to its monopolistic position. The emergence of the Tunisian Farmers' Union in 2012 was a move toward greater union pluralism, but failed to end the UTAP's monopoly.[13]

Despite the UTAP's strength, farmer union action in Tunisia is hampered by the fragmentation of farmer groups, limited resources, and pluralistic – even divergent – interests.[14] In fact, according to the UTAP, the extent to which its proposals are integrated into state policy is directly correlated with the strength of its negotiation, persuasion, and the robustness of its supporting studies and arguments. However, its capacity to conduct such comprehensive efforts across all issues is limited by resource constraints.[15]

Tunisian activists and NGOs have also played an important role in the national agricultural governance structure since the revolution of 2011.[16] While an official count of organizations working on food sovereignty in Tunisia is unavailable, civil society engagement in this area can be broadly categorized. A core group of approximately five organizations explicitly defines food sovereignty as a central part of their mission; the Observatoire de la Souveraineté Alimentaire et de l'Environnement is one notable example. Another group of 20 to 40 organizations operates with missions that significantly overlap with the principles of food sovereignty, focusing on areas such as sustainable agriculture, rural development, environmental protection, farmers' rights, and local food systems. Their contributions span from advocacy and awareness campaigns for sustainable practices, food sovereignty, and food security to grassroots community development

8 Ben Kahla, K., S. Makhlouf and A. Souissi. ***Revue stratégique de la sécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle en Tunisie***, Institut Tunisien des Etudes Stratégiques – ITES, 2017 (Ben Kahla, Makhlouf, and Souissi, ***Revue stratégique***, 2017).

9 Participants in roundtable "Farmers Group", personal communication, 4 April 2025 ("Famers Group", 2025).

10 "Farmers Group", 2025.

11 UTAP representative, personal communication, 9 May 2025 (UTAP representative, 2025).

12 UTAP representative, 2025.

13 Ben Kahla, Makhlouf, and Souissi, ***Revue stratégique***, 2017.

14 Ben Kahla, Makhlouf, and Souissi, ***Revue stratégique***, 2017.

15 UTAP representative, 2025.

16 UTAP representative, 2025.

interventions that empower marginalized farmers, such as female farmworkers. They are also playing a vital role in advocating for sustainable agricultural approaches and conservation methods, and even supplementing state action by offering key services and information, particularly where state capital is limited. They are also becoming extremely influential in shaping agricultural policies, hence contributing to the social and solidarity economy as well as to community resilience.[17]

4. The Costs and Vulnerabilities of Tunisia's Agricultural Policies

4.1. From Fields to Foreign Markets: Liberalization's Broken Promise

Tunisian agricultural governance and policies are the result of an incremental political and historical trajectory that can be categorized into five stages.[18, 19]

The first stage was characterized by nationalization policies and the resurgence of a national landed aristocracy in the early years of Tunisian independence (1956-1961). Focused on the "Tunisification" of agriculture, the newly formed post-independence government transferred land previously owned by colonizers to Tunisian farmers, creating a new landowning class. Land tenure systems like habous were reformed in favor of privatization, and Tunisia saw the rise of a landowning bourgeoisie alongside traditional agriculture.[20]

This period was followed by a state capitalism phase (1961-1969) that inaugurated the agricultural sector's role in national development. The state assumed its central role, and agriculture was used to generate surplus for state investment in economic development, aiming to industrialize and modernize. The government seized land from small-scale farmers to establish state-run cooperatives. By 1969, 700 cooperatives covered approximately 600,000 hectares. Small farmers, owning less than 5 hectares, contributed about one-third of this land, while the rest came from state-owned land. Large landowners were largely uninvolved. By converting small farmers into salaried workers and enforcing low prices for agricultural products at the production level, the state marginalized the cooperative farmers. This "forced cooperation" model led to rebellion and sabotage among producers, while the administrative class gained power and privileges; the model was eventually abandoned.[21]

A difficult decade followed for the agricultural sector (1970-1982) as Tunisia shifted toward a liberal economy. The focus on integrating into the international labor market through low wages was done at the agricultural sector's expense. Agriculture's primary role was to provide low-cost food for the new cheap labor force to get into the global market. The "Green Revolution" model of industrialized agriculture was adopted to boost cereal production. Exploitation of land was heightened by the cultivation of commercial crops, like grapes (for wine) and citrus fruits, driven by market demand mainly in Europe. Monoculture became dominant, disregarding local ecological systems and cultural practices. Agriculture transitioned from a subsistence model to one for trade balance adjustment, with olive oil being at the forefront of exports, followed later by dates and citrus.

Immediately afterwards, the agricultural sector experienced a boom phase, albeit not for long (1982-1990). The state made significant investments in agriculture and rural areas, and agricultural product prices increased while input subsidies were maintained. Local development agencies were created, and integrated rural development programs were funded.

In late 1983, the Tunisian government, facing

17 NGO representative, personal communication, April 21, 2025 (NGO representative, 2025).

18 Elloumi, M. ***Tunisie***, 2018, pp.42-62.

19 Agrebi, N. and M.J. Abderrazak. ***Renforcer la sécurité alimentaire de la Tunisie en 2022-2023***, Institut Tunisien des Etudes Stratégiques – ITES, 2022.

20 ***Habous***, or "endowment", is a traditional religious institution in which the owner of a plot of land or property irrevocably dedicates it to a charitable or public interest use (public habous) or for the benefit of needy members of his family.

21 هيثم قاسمي. قراءة نقدية للتجربة التعاضدية في تونس، انحياز، 14 ماي 2023.

pressure from the IMF, implemented the Structural Adjustment Program. A core part of this plan was to end government subsidies on basic foods. This policy was put into action on 29 December 1983, when the government stopped subsidizing wheat and semolina. As a direct result, the price of bread and other staples more than doubled, severely impacting poor Tunisians who relied on these items for a significant portion of their diet. Eventually, underinvestment and price policies led to farmer dissatisfaction and social unrest in the "bread riots" of 1984.

In the 1980s and '90s, the World Trade Organization, international financial institutions, and the Structural Adjustment Program advanced trade liberalization policies that negatively impacted the Tunisian agrifood system.[22] Although liberal policies have sometimes alleviated shortages and boosted local production, significant limitations exist.[23] Evaluations of the Adjustment Program's implementation show that the growth rate of agricultural production was slower than that of Tunisia's overall economy, indicating that the reforms did not necessarily improve agricultural performance.[24] Price policy reforms and subsidy reductions resulted in unfavorable pricing for most agricultural products. Even if nominal prices rose, real prices fell, reducing the farmers' income. Increased input costs because of the subsidy removal created deflationary price pressures, marginalizing small family farmers by limiting their access to resources, increasing their vulnerability to economic shocks, and reducing their overall competitiveness. These effects have reinforced unequal competition with developed countries and increased reliance on food importation.[25]

Tunisia's agricultural policies have also been shaped by corruption and favoritism. Under the rule of President Ben Ali, agricultural export monopolies and access to the most fertile lands were granted to regime loyalists. Intermediaries, large-scale farming enterprises, and corporations within the food system were strengthened at the expense of small-scale farms.[26] Water resources were overexploited, with deep wells drilled to supply large loyalist farms and the tourism and industry sectors.[27] The ongoing underrepresentation of farmers due to their limited political power and the UTAP's inability to influence the political sphere has meant that government price controls and subsidies (such as in the cereals sector) benefit consumers and millers disproportionately, while farmers get the lowest share of profits.[28]

4.2. The Food Security Trap

The concept of food security, as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization in 1996, emphasizes universal access to sufficient, healthy, and nutritious food. However, liberal interpretations reduce food security to a balance between supply and demand and a logic of comparative advantage that favors trade over self-sufficiency policies. International institutions promote import policies as more cost-effective and able to mitigate the risk of climate-induced shortages while criticizing self-sufficiency as economically inefficient.

Tunisia has implemented the trade-driven approach to food security. Policies have concentrated on boosting the economic well-being of larger landholders and allocating resources to new land development on the assumption that improvements in agricultural exports would provide sufficient income to import basic foodstuffs like wheat without causing a trade deficit. Hence, olive groves on the east coast became increasingly dense and concentrated in the hands of an increasingly small number of owners; vegetable and fruit gardens cover the inland regions and central steppes; and large-scale facilities dominated olive processing. The state has invested little in small farmers and almost nothing in sustainable or labor-intensive "technics".[29]

For countries like Tunisia, food security hinges on having sufficient foreign currency reserves to finance food imports. Yet Tunisia struggles to secure adequate foreign exchange given the volatility of global prices, the long-term deterioration of commodity terms of trade, and the state's limited

22 Jouili, M. *Ajustement structurel, mondialisation et agriculture familiale en Tunisie*, Thèse de doctorat en économie, Université De Montpellier 1, Montpellier, 2008 (Jouili, *Ajustement structurel*, 2008).

23 Jouili, *Ajustement structurel*, 2008.

24 Economic Brief, *Distortions to Agricultural Policy Incentives in Tunisia*, African Development Bank Group, 2012.

25 African Development Bank Group, *Economic Brief*, 2012.

26 Jouili, *Ajustement structurel*, 2008.

27 Altaeb, M. and A. Chibani. *Local Roots: Indigenous Seeds and Tunisian Food Security*, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2023.

28 Elloumi, *Tunisie*, 2018, pp.42-62.

29 Ajl, M. "Delinking, Food Sovereignty, and Populist Agronomy: Notes on an Intellectual History of the Peasant Path in the Global South", *Review of African Political Economy* 45, no. 155 (2018) (Ajl, "Delinking, food sovereignty", 2018).

access to financial markets due to political tensions. As a result, the government manages the population's diet solely from a balance-of-trade point of view, with the aim of reducing the food trade deficit. While this deficit did decrease in 2023, it was not a sign of a healthier economy or a natural recovery in the market, but rather a direct result of a government policy to significantly cut import volumes (-4.4% in 2022-2023 compared to +31.7% in 2021-2022).[30] This strategy of reducing various essential food products imports to reduce the trade deficit and reduce foreign currency-based exchange has led to systemic shortages and price hikes for basic commodities in Tunisia. Shortages of basic food products – sugar, coffee, milk, and cereals – are becoming commonplace, with endless queues in front of stores and bakeries.

Another limitation of a food security framework is that the global food supply may not align with national dietary preferences and cultural identity. In Tunisia, the Mediterranean diet is being undermined, as the basic food products considered essential based on caloric density – such as bread, flour, pasta, sugar, milk, and seed oil – are subsidized at the expense of healthier alternatives, such as olive oil. Consumer habits have changed significantly, increasing chronic diseases associated with diet, which currently cause 60% of deaths. Obesity now affects half the population, cardiovascular diseases affect 28.7%, and diabetes 18%.[31]

Moreover, over-reliance on global markets has exposed the country to price and quantity volatility and demonstrated that a food security framework is not resilient to adverse shocks. The 2007-2008 world food crisis revealed most clearly the cyclical vulnerabilities of the Tunisian agrifood system and its inability to guarantee strategic sectors such as cereals and dairy.[32] The situation continued to worsen, culminating in the 2010-2011 protests. Yet while the Tunisian revolution was sparked by social and economic protests in rural areas, the post-revolution debates from 2011 to 2019 have focused on political and identity issues, neglecting agriculture and rural development. The agricultural world has been mostly forgotten during the transitional period; agricultural policy has maintained pre-revolution approaches and a focus on consumer protection.

Tunisia's agricultural system has continued to face severe challenges, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian War.[33] The pandemic primarily affected food access – first through supply chain disturbances in 2020 and later through decreased purchasing power – while the war has affected both food availability and access since 2023. Heavily reliant on cereal imports from Russia and Ukraine, Tunisia had to ration its imports while facing inflation, particularly for food items, and managing the significant food trade balance. The price of agricultural input greatly increased, with small farmers and fishers being most affected by rising production costs and declining incomes. These crises have underscored the vulnerabilities of being highly reliant on imports and the volatility of food security through global trade.[34]

Given these complexities, the right to food for all citizens cannot be solely entrusted to market forces. Food security as a simple global supply-demand equilibrium is not a comprehensive approach that can tackle poverty and vulnerability.

4.3. Climate Stress on Agriculture

Climate change is a major threat to Tunisia's agricultural system. Tunisia is already experiencing a drier climate, with the average annual precipitation rate reduced by 3% over the last 30 years, exacerbating water scarcity. A reduction in crop yields is undermining access to food.[35] This trend of declining rainfall will continue, with climate models forecasting a further reduction of 10% to 20% this decade alone.[36]

Climate projections for different Tunisian regions demonstrate diverse trends. Areas such as Bizerte, Tabarka, Jendouba, and Klibia are trending towards

30 Institut National de Statistique – Trade Balance.

31 Boudiche, S., M. Ameur, Z. Rached and R. Khaldi. "Enhancing quality-driven food consumption policies in Tunisia", ***New Medit*** 21, no. 4 (2022).

32 Abderrazak, M.J. ***The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the Tunisian food system***, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, North Africa Office, 2023.

33 Agrebi and Abderrazak, ***Renforcer la sécurité alimentaire***, 2022.

34 Jouili, M. and Elloumi M. "Extraversion versus développement agricole autocentré: Le cas des pays du Maghreb", ***Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement*** 44, no. 3 (2022).

35 Ben Youssef, A. ***Climate Change: A Growing Threat to Sustainable Development in Tunisia***, The Economic Research Forum (ERF), 2024 (Ben Youssef, ***Climate change***, 2024).

36 Chebil, A., A. Frija, M. Makhlouf, C. Thabet and S. Jebari. "Effects of Water Scarcity on the Performances of the Agricultural Sector and Adaptation Strategies in Tunisia", ***IntechOpen***, 2019.

wetter climate conditions, while Thala is becoming drier. A fluctuating climate pattern is predicted in southern Tunisia, which is generally arid and now experiencing years of extreme drought, with the exceptions of Sfax and Tozeur. Studies show clear effects of drought on agricultural production, with significant statistical correlation between drought indices and the production of cereals such as wheat and barley, olive oil, and citrus fruits. Correlations were particularly strong during periods of moderate or intense drought and humidity, highlighting the high sensitivity of these crops to extreme climatic events.[37]

Projections paint a concerning picture of the future, with water scarcity anticipated to cause a further reduction in overall agricultural yields by 10%-30% by the year 2050. Predictions also suggest that the increasing frequency and intensity of droughts will cause decreases of 40% in cereal production and 32% in olive production by 2050.[38] Tunisia has already felt the acute impact of water scarcity on agriculture in the drought of 2023, when the wheat harvest represented only a fraction of the typical annual yield, forcing the country to import 95% of its wheat needs.[39]

Climate emergencies occur in already complex situations. The agricultural sector, particularly in the semiarid and arid parts of the country, is shaped by the complex interaction between water and land management policies. Tunisian policies initially attempted to prioritize large-scale mobilization of water resources through infrastructure and collective land management. But economic liberalization and the imperative to address water scarcity have driven a shift to individualization, privatization, and decentralized resource control, leading to overexploitation and regulatory weaknesses in water management. Tunisia has already mobilized virtually all of its renewable and nonrenewable water resources, particularly groundwater. By prioritizing industrial crops for export for decades, agricultural policies have led to the intensification of crops requiring significant irrigation, thus placing a heavy burden on the country's limited water resources. In reality, by exporting these water-intensive products, Tunisia is exporting its increasingly scarce water resources at a time when it is struggling to meet its own needs for both consumption and food production.[40] This highlights the inherent contradiction between an agricultural strategy focused on exports and the growing challenges presented by the climate crisis and water scarcity.

Similarly, in the management of land resources, land reform and privatization have transformed the diverse land property system – encompassing private, collective, state-owned, and religious endowment lands – in ways that further limit the state's capacity to effectively regulate water access, leading to informal practices and environmental degradation.[41]

Moreover, specific structural imbalances in Tunisia's governance framework impede effective climate action and the implementation of necessary adaptation efforts. These include the country's highly centralized governance structure, the lack of functional and properly resourced local government bodies, and inadequate involvement of stakeholders like municipalities and CSOs during policy cycles. Tunisia has formally adhered to international climate accords, included water rights in its constitution, implemented a sustainable development commission, and framed an environmental legal framework, but without any practical applications. National policymakers have not prioritized the development of a long-term plan to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change in recent years.[42]

The social discontent around this situation is already being expressed, as demonstrated by the number of protests over access to potable water – the most common type of protest in 2024 – and the rise of social movements specifically demanding a constitutional right to water.[43]

37 Ben Abdelmalek, M. and I. Nouiri. "Study of Trends and Mapping of Drought Events in Tunisia and their Impacts on Agricultural Production", ***The Science of the total environment*** 734 (2020).

38 Ben Youssef, ***Climate change***, 2024.

39 Thabet, C., R. Zouhair and A. Chebil. "Improving Agricultural Policies to Enhance Food Security in Tunisia: A Retrospective and Prospective Analysis", ***New Medit*** 3 (2024) (Thabet, Zouhair, and Chebil, "Improving agricultural policies", 2024).

40 مؤسسة فريدريش إيبرت. مجموعة العمل من أجل السيادة الغذائية. غذاؤنا، فلاحتنا، سيادتنا، 2019.

41 Gharbi, I. and Elloumi M. "L'agriculture irriguée en Tunisie: politiques hydrauliques et politiques de régulation foncière", ***Cahiers Agricultures*** 32 (2023).

42 Jouili, ***Olive Oil and Water***, 2023.

43 Omar, N. ***Securing Tunisia's Constitutional Right to Water: Policy Solutions***, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025.

4.4. The Marginalization of Small-Scale Farmers

From a liberalization and food security perspective, large-scale farming is seen as more successful than small-scale farming. Large agricultural enterprises have the means to buy heavy machinery, pay for land and water, use new technologies, and develop capabilities for marketing. The privatization of state farms, cuts in farm subsidies, farm price liberalization, the reorganization of the farm credit system, and the gradual privatization of food marketing networks, have empowered intermediaries and large-scale and corporate agricultural enterprises to the detriment of the family-farming sector and rain-fed agriculture.[44,45,46]

Millions of small-scale farmers struggle to survive amid unequal and fearsome competition for agricultural resources with capitalist investors who have access to financing and markets.[47] Weak professional associations – like agricultural cooperatives that represent less than 7% of smallholders[48] – further exacerbate this disparity. Moreover, small farmers have limited opportunities for additional off-farm income and restricted access to credit. Banks are reluctant to extend loans to small-scale farmers due to the absence of guarantees and the complexities of time-consuming banking procedures. Furthermore, the state withdrew its support for bank lending to small- and medium-scale farmers as part of structural adjustments. Microfinance institutions charge high interest rates, making them more of a problem than an alternative solution for small-scale farmers.[49] The transfer of government support, extension, and technical assistance programs to the private sector has left small-scale farmers without essential services, as they often cannot afford private agricultural advisers.[50]

Even when small farmers secure financial assistance or aid through collaborations between the Agricultural Investment Promotion Agency and donor organizations or international cooperation bodies, this support frequently falls short of addressing their actual needs. For instance, farmers might gain access to land and seeds but lack crucial water resources. Furthermore, significant administrative complexities consistently impede project implementation, often leaving small farmers burdened with debt and no tangible progress.[51] In addition, the direct investment grants and tax benefits managed by the Agricultural Investment Promotion Agency disproportionately favor large agricultural enterprises due to the intricate application processes and limitations on subsidy payments, effectively excluding many small and medium-sized farms from accessing this support.[52] The implementation of value-added tax exemptions and suspensions on certain types of agricultural equipment also encounters practical difficulties and imposes high administrative costs on both farmers and the tax authorities.[53]

Furthermore, instead of lowering farmers' production costs, subsidizing agricultural inputs like fertilizers and machinery has primarily benefited distributors and importers. This has intensified since 2016, as subsidized inputs are often available only in limited quantities through official channels and subsequently sold at much higher prices on the black market. Even critical inputs like animal feed are traded on the black market at nearly double the official prices.[54]

The shift in national policies from self-sufficiency to food security particularly affected small-scale farmers. Statistics on food crop prices between 2011 and 2023 indicate a generally rising trend, with some classes such as fruits and citrus reporting greater price fluctuations. In addition, the inflation-control strategy that prioritizes consumer prices over producer income has had detrimental effects on farmer livelihoods and agricultural development in recent years.[55] Stagnant agricultural prices and rising input costs have led to a decline in small farm profits. In addition, the increasing effects of climate change, such as more frequent and more intense droughts, disproportionately affect small farmers, who generally have fewer resources and

44 Gana, "The rural and agricultural roots", 2012.

45 Researcher 1, personal communication, 21 April 2025 (Researcher 1, 2025).

46 Researcher 3, personal communication, 12 May 2025 (Researcher 3, 2025).

47 Researcher 3, 2025.

48 Jouili, *Olive Oil and Water*, 2023.

49 Researcher 3, 2025.

50 Jouili, *Olive Oil and Water*, 2023.

51 "Farmers Group", 2025

52 Thabet, Zouhair, and Chebil, "Improving agricultural policies", 2024.

53 Thabet, Zouhair, and Chebil, "Improving agricultural policies", 2024.

54 Thabet, Zouhair, and Chebil, "Improving agricultural policies", 2024.

55 Thabet, Zouhair, and Chebil, "Improving agricultural policies", 2024.

less capacity to implement adaptation strategies.[56]

4.5. The Rise in Rural Poverty

National strategies have historically used the agricultural sector to boost other economic sectors and prioritized providing urban areas with essential food and resources like water and land, often to the detriment of rural communities.[57] Between 2015 and 2021, poverty increased significantly in rural-agrarian regions, such as in the northwest (a 22.5% increase) and the central west (a 37% increase). The overall rural poverty rate decreased slightly from 26% in 2015 to 24.8% in 2021, but was still significantly higher than the 12.7% poverty rate in urban areas.[58] These figures are also influenced by internal migration: poverty in rural areas can be transferred to urban areas when rural inhabitants migrate in search of employment.

Farmers and agricultural workers specifically have high poverty rates: 22.8% and 31.9%, respectively. Farmers comprised only 6% of the total population in 2021, but over 9% of impoverished Tunisians; agricultural workers constituted 2.4% of the population but about 5% of impoverished Tunisians.[59]

Competition from both large-scale domestic farms – which often benefit from economies of scale and potentially preferential access to resources – and imported agricultural products that may be cheaper due to different production costs or subsidies in other countries, has weakened rural communities over the years. At the household level, processes of restructuring have manifested important shifts in farm production patterns, as well as in the work strategies of family members. The social reproduction of small-scale farmers has been challenged by having to produce export crops instead of planting cereals or raising traditional livestock. In addition, the liberalization and privatization of the agricultural sector have cost small-scale farmers their land: men are forced to migrate to find work in large urban areas while women and children remain to work as seasonal laborers, mostly in the olive sector on large-scale farms.[60]

In addition, climate change particularly impacts rural areas. Agricultural systems in semiarid Tunisia face significant threats as a vast majority (80%) of the farms surveyed in a recent study showed very low resilience to climate impacts.[61] The decline in agricultural productivity, as a consequence of climate change and the resulting water scarcity, increases unemployment in rural areas, where many depend on agriculture as their main source of income.[62] The reduction in farm income erodes the purchasing power of rural households, which in turn negatively affects local businesses and services, resulting in an economic spiral in regions that are often already economically vulnerable and increasing rural poverty. The climate crisis will also act as a multiplier of existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities, particularly in rural zones where access to diversified economic sources of revenue and essential services such as healthcare and education is often limited.

5. Recommendations: Food Sovereignty as an Alternative

As the analysis thus far has suggested, in order to face climate change challenges and promote integrated approaches that actively engage local communities and institutions in the development of adaptation programs, reform of Tunisia's agricultural system must depart from the liberal logic of food security based on trade balance. Studies show that the key factors influencing farmer resilience are financial stability, food access, adaptive capacity, and access to both productive and non-productive resources.[63] Yet effective support – such as

56 Food Sovereignty activist, personal communication, 31 May 2025 (Food Sovereignty activist, 2025).

57 Elloumi, ***Tunisie***, 2018, pp.42-62.

58 Jouili, ***Olive Oil and Water***, 2023.

59 Jouili, ***Olive Oil and Water***, 2023.

60 Gana, A. "Processes of Liberalization and Family Farm Restructuring in Tunisia", in ***Farming and Rural Systems Research and Extension*** – Local identities and globalization, Agenzia Regionale per lo Sviluppo e l'Innovazione nel settore Agricolo e forestale, 2002.

61 Ben Abdelmalek, M. and I. Nouiri. "Study of Trends and Mapping of Drought Events in Tunisia and their Impacts on Agricultural Production", ***The Science of the Total Environment*** 734 (2020) (Ben Abdelmalek and Nouiri, "Study of trends", 2020).

62 مؤسسة فريدريش إيبرت. مجموعة العمل من أجل السيادة الغذائية. غذاؤنا، فلاحتنا، سيادتنا، 2019.

63 Ben Nasr, J., H. Chaar, F. Bouchiba and L. Zaibet. "Assessing and

promoting new irrigation management techniques or the use of drought-resistant seed varieties – is currently absent.[64] In this context, the concept of food sovereignty has gained interest within Tunisian activist and CSO spaces as a paradigm shift from conventional food security frameworks. Yet defining this approach and the pathways to its implementation face practical challenges.

5.1. Defining Food Sovereignty for the Tunisian Context

Food sovereignty is in direct opposition to market-dependent food security. It defends people's right to define their own food and agricultural systems. LVC's definition of food sovereignty places producers and consumers at the heart of food systems, prioritizing healthy and culturally appropriate food produced in sustainable and environmentally comprehensive ways, free from the dictates of global markets and transnational corporations. This framework is essentially a resistance strategy aimed at dismantling the current corporate trade regime and shifting farming systems toward local determination.

For some researchers and activists, food sovereignty means radical democracy in how we produce and consume food: the producers and consumers should collectively decide the goals of food production.[65,66] This requires ensuring that decision-makers possess practical knowledge and expertise and that power structures are balanced to protect everyone's interests. Through this framework, achieving food sovereignty in Tunisia means addressing the fundamental issue of who controls the means of production, and placing ownership and decision-making power directly in the hands of the producers.[67]

For other actors in the agrifood sector, however, food sovereignty is confused with notions of food self-sufficiency, obscuring its distinct principles.[68] Food self-sufficiency can be a component or a desirable outcome of food sovereignty, but it does not equate to it. In fact, a country might achieve self-sufficiency in a particular crop, but if that production relies on exploiting resources, marginalizing small-scale farmers, or is dictated by global market forces, it would not be considered sovereign. Food sovereignty offers a more comprehensive and holistic vision for food systems that are not only productive but also just, equitable, resilient, and environmentally sound.

The confusion in defining food sovereignty can be explained by the broadness of its LVC definition, which was intended to allow for national and contextual flexibility. In fact, the broad definition of food sovereignty has led to a spectrum of interpretations, especially among Tunisian activists and CSOs, potentially hindering coherence and even preventing collaboration among advocacy groups.[69] Some call for disengagement and a rupture from the global food trade; others focus on reforming existing food systems to be more equitable, rather than seeking a radical transformation. As a result, the specific policies and alternatives proposed for moving away from the current system are strongly influenced by the activists' views on whether or not it is necessary to cut ties with capitalism and neoliberalism.[70]

Moreover, discussions surrounding food sovereignty often remain concentrated within urban intellectual circles, with limited engagement from small-scale farmers and impoverished rural citizens who form its theoretical bedrock.[71] This disconnect arises because the activists' macro-level focus on dismantling the food security framework, while valid, often fails to address the immediate, pressing concerns of small-scale farmers on the ground.[72] Most discussions about food sovereignty have sidelined the crucial topic of rural and agricultural development and agricultural modernization, particularly the role of rural households as both producers and consumers of food. This oversight has led to the complete neglect of critical issues facing farmers with less than 5 hectares of land, many of

Building Climate Change Resilience of Farming Systems in Tunisian Semi-Arid Areas", *Environmental Science and Pollution Research International* 28, no. 34 (2021).

64 Ben Abdelmalek and Nouiri, "Study of trends", 2020.

65 Researcher 1, 2025.

66 Researcher 3, 2025.

67 Researcher 3, 2025.

68 General observations during round tables and interviews.

69 Observations during round table "Civil Society Group", personal communication, 18 April 2025 ("Civil Society Group", 2025).

70 General observations during round tables and interviews.

71 Food Sovereignty activist, 2025.

72 "Farmers Group", 2025.

whom struggle to feed themselves. Specifically, social differentiation and inequity, gendered labor divisions, the significant role of women as heads of households, and the unique challenges women face have been entirely ignored.[73,74]

Progressing toward a common definition and vision of food sovereignty in Tunisia will necessitate a more inclusive approach with efforts to better reach small-scale farmers and agricultural workers who are central to this concept.

Recommendations: To effectively advance food sovereignty, Tunisian NGOs, activists, researchers, and unions must focus on including small-scale farmers and making the agrarian question a central part of their advocacy. This can be achieved through three key strategies:

- Directly engage small-scale farmers: All food sovereignty discussions and initiatives must actively involve farmers. By addressing farmers' immediate challenges – such as access to resources, fair prices, and their ability to feed their families – food sovereignty advocates can build trust and ensure that proposed policies are practical and relevant. This engagement creates a two-way learning process that benefits both farmers and the advocacy groups.
- Develop a shared vision: Instead of relying on a broad, abstract definition, food sovereignty advocates must work with farmers to create a common, locally grounded understanding of food sovereignty. To be as relevant and inclusive as possible, this shared vision should integrate social and gender inequities.
- Integrate the agrarian question: Advocacy efforts must place core issues of rural life at the forefront. This includes prioritizing discussions on landownership, rural development, and agricultural modernization. By focusing on practical topics like improving infrastructure, modernizing farming techniques, and supporting farmers as both producers and consumers, advocates can create a more comprehensive and impactful strategy.

73 Food Sovereignty activist, 2025.

74 Researcher 3, 2025.

5.2. Defining Small-Scale Farmers

The divergence between different actors also includes who is going to achieve food sovereignty. The basic definition of food sovereignty involves the "small-scale farmer" as a fundamental player, yet none of the interviewed researchers and activists working on agricultural issues in Tunisia, nor the farmer unions and farmers themselves, agree on who the small-scale farmers are.

For the farmers' unions, the analytical utility of "small-scale farmer" as a distinct category is limited. They consider that delineating this category with a land ownership threshold of less than 5 hectares is not useful for understanding many agricultural sectors, particularly cereal growing, where small farmers never own less than 5 hectares because such plots are economically unviable.[75] Unions also note that the minimum land needed also varies significantly across Tunisia's diverse agroclimatic zones. For instance, a small-scale farmer might operate on 2-3 hectares of irrigated land in regions like Gabès but would require a larger plot if farming in rain-fed areas such as Sidi Bouzid. Similarly, plot sizes can differ for fruit and vegetable production in places like Kef or Siliana, especially if the land is not irrigated or only lightly irrigated.[76] In addition, farmers' unions are generally opposed to the division of farmers into small- and large-scale farmers; they argue for combating the negative perceptions of large-scale agricultural investors within the Tunisian agrifood system, as they consider these entities essential to the sector's economic sustainability.[77]

Beyond the union's role in unifying all farmers, there is unanimous agreement among the unions that small-scale farmers should be identified not according to land size but by their ability to access the market and means of production. Small-scale farmers, in this view, are those who produce either entirely for subsistence or mainly for local markets, with limited marketing capacity. This category includes subsistence farmers as well as those who manage relatively large market garden plots and who derive at least a significant part of their income (or its equivalent in production value) from their farms. This definition excludes larger-scale

75 UTAP representative, 2025.

76 Researcher 3, 2025.

77 "Farmers Group", 2025.

agricultural producers or investors.[78]

Recommendations:

- Establish a clear definition: Efforts must be made to establish a clear, shared understanding of who constitutes a "small-scale farmer". Arriving at a unified and contextually relevant definition is not just an academic exercise; it is a prerequisite for achieving food sovereignty because it ensures that advocacy efforts and policies are effectively targeted. The lack of a unified definition complicates efforts to understand the role of small-scale agriculture in the rural economy and hinders collaborative action. Without this clarity, advocacy efforts may fail to reach the communities most critical to achieving a truly sovereign and equitable food system.
- Consider market access instead of land size: Instead of being solely based on farm size, a more comprehensive definition should consider a farmer's access to land, markets, credit, and other essential resources. By focusing on these factors, advocates can identify and support the most vulnerable producers who are the backbone of food sovereignty.

5.3. Agroecology as a Practical Pillar for Food Sovereignty

Agroecological practices, such as no-tillage farming, crop rotation, organic fertilization, and biodiversity conservation, are not merely technical adjustments; they represent a profound break from immediate yields and chemical inputs – which have historically undermined soil fertility and biodiversity – and embody a holistic approach that redefines the relationship between individuals, the land, and food.[79] Agroecology empowers farmers, especially small-scale farmers, by restoring their control over land, seeds, and resources; reducing their economic dependence; minimizing external input needs; and strengthening direct producer-consumer ties.

The primary objective of agroecology is not capitalist accumulation through short, destructive, and extractive management of the land, but rather working with the ecosystem while respecting all living organisms. The aim is to feed consumers in the present, while also guaranteeing future production through preserving soil fertility and biodiversity. This transformation shifts farmers from mere raw material producers to purveyors of "food" with deep social, cultural, and health implications. Consumers also evolve into active citizens valuing shared heritage and well-being.[80] Hence, agroecology is inherently an act of resistance against industrial monocultures and profit-driven agriculture.

Small-scale farmers in North Africa are interested in agroecology as a set of farming practices, partly because they have proved effective as survival strategies to overcome difficult environmental and economic conditions.[81] To date, however, agroecology is still considered a marginal practice in Tunisia. Even if farmers increasingly recognize the need for ecological transition and possess the knowledge to achieve it, they often lack the necessary resources to transition from classical farming to agroecological farming. They also lack the political leverage to obtain support from the MARHP, which is currently only conceiving solutions at the national scale without considering the local.[82] Hence, it is crucial that food sovereignty activists support agroecologists in developing farming solutions at the community level and advocate for agroecology as a pillar to reach food sovereignty at the national level.

Recommendations: Several key interventions are vital for fostering a successful and equitable agricultural transition:

- Valorize the social and solidarity economy: Support and integrate the principles of the social and solidarity economy into agricultural policy. This involves promoting cooperative models and local initiatives that prioritize community well-being over profit.
- Shift state subsidies to promote agroecology: Advocate for a fundamental change in

78 Researcher 3, 2025.

79 Altieri, M.A. "Agroecology: The Science of Natural Resource Management for Poor Farmers in Marginal Environments", *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment* 93, no. 1-3 (2002).

80 Wezel, A., S. Bellon, T. Doré, C. Francis, D. Vallod and C. David. "Agroecology as a Science, a Movement and a Practice: A Review", *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 29, no. 4 (2009).

81 Ameur, F., H. Amichi and C. Leauthaud. "Agroecology in North African Irrigated Plains? Mapping Promising Practices and Characterizing Farmers' Underlying Logics", *Regional Environmental Change* 20, no. 4 (2020).

82 Food Sovereignty activist, 2025.

government subsidy programs. By reorienting government subsidies from conventional farming to agroecology, the state can incentivize sustainable practices like using natural fertilizers and preserving local seeds. This approach would specifically benefit small-scale farmers who are often at the forefront of these methods but lack resources. It would also fund research and training to help farmers transition, ultimately promoting an ecological, equitable, and accessible food system for everyone.

- Support consumers: Instead of subsidizing large-scale production, subsidies should be redirected to support consumption, making healthy and sustainable food more accessible and affordable for all citizens.

5.4. Advocating for a Food Sovereignty Alliance

There is a growing conviction among activists and CSOs involved in the Tunisian agrifood system that change will not emerge from government directives, but from farmers collectively developing their own advocacy systems and organizational structures, thereby enhancing their political and regional visibility in both local and broader markets.[83,84,85] Given the extensive marginalization of small-scale farmers, who are central to the concept of food sovereignty, the feasibility of this model in Tunisia becomes conditional on the mobilization of small-scale farmers and broader segments of society.[86]

A primary challenge lies with small-scale farmers themselves, who must self-organize effectively to establish a favorable power dynamic. Currently, farmer mobilization is rare and mainly targeted at specific issues like water or market access, without a broader vision to strengthen their visibility. Small-scale farmers are the least represented in the farmers' unions and the most disadvantaged by the heterogeneity of agricultural interests as they lack adequate representation. As a result, the power dynamic between agricultural actors appears increasingly inequitable.[87] Small-scale farmers lack bargaining power, are excluded from decision-making, and also do not benefit from UTAP-sponsored access to state subsidies and loans.[88] In fact, although UTAP claims to defend the interests of small farmers as a key objective of its union-led efforts, no specific mechanism is implemented to guarantee the direct representation of small-scale farmers, while such mechanisms do exist for other groups, such as women.[89]

According to a unionist from the UTAP and the Tunisian Farmers' Union, farmers, and especially small-scale farmers, do not "fully understand"[90] how a union works. They argue that for some farmers, union membership is only a way to gain access to government assistance, subsidies, and sometimes even social activities.[91] Other farmers criticize the UTAP bargaining tools that prioritize dialogue and phased negotiation and avoid immediate radical pressure tactics like street protests. Some farmers even prefer to advocate independently, weakening the UTAP's bargaining power.[92] In addition, the UTAP must contend with the MARHP's broader national vision, which may prioritize other sectors; this constrains the union from advocating for certain policies, which in turn creates farmer distrust in the UTAP if their demands are not met. From their perspective, some farmers, mainly small farmers, perceive both the UTAP and the Tunisian Farmers' Union as complicit in approving policies that favor large investors and a burgeoning agroindustrial sector and as biased toward wealthy investors. This explains their reluctance to become actively involved in the unions.

Cohesive, solidarity-based networks capable of defending rural interests against broader pressures – such as urbanization, free trade, and imposed policies – are notably absent.[93,94] CSOs working with small-scale farmers are making efforts to integrate them into CSO networks and foster a robust civic space, but these are still very sparse. Nevertheless, through collaborative knowledge production with rural workers, diverse media initiatives, and gatherings and events, CSOs strive to popularize complex concepts like food sovereignty and raise

83 Researcher 1, 2025.
84 Food Sovereignty activist, 2025.
85 NGO representative, 2025.
86 Food Sovereignty activist, 2025.
87 Researcher 1, 2025.
88 "Farmers Group", 2025.
89 UTAP representative, 2025.
90 "Farmers Group", 2025.
91 "Farmers Group", 2025.
92 UTAP representative, 2025.
93 Food Sovereignty activist, 2025.
94 Researcher 1, 2025.

awareness about farmers' challenges.[95] To better amplify farmers' voices, CSOs are strategically forming broader collaborations with farmer groups. By encouraging farmers to organize into structured entities like unions or political parties, CSOs aim to strengthen the farmers' collective influence and political power.[96]

In addition, establishing alliances across the Arab region is essential. Many countries in the Arab world face similar issues, such as water scarcity, desertification, and the impacts of neoliberal trade policies. A regional alliance could develop shared solutions and advocate for policies that address these common problems. In addition, conflicts and political instability are devastating local food production and supply chains in Palestine, south Lebanon, and Syria. By building strong alliances, Arab food sovereignty movements could create a system of mutual support and solidarity, ensuring that farmers in crisis can rely on their neighbors for food and resources. Even in peacetime, strategic collaboration is essential to build a resilient regional food system.

Currently, national farmers' unions and farmers' movements in Tunisia are poorly represented in the international sphere, as are Arab groups generally. For example, the LVC in 2013 had just one member in the entire WANA region: Palestine's Union of Agricultural Work Committees; in 2017, Morocco's National Federation of Agricultural Unions and Tunisia's One Million Rural Women joined.[97] This LVC WANA delegation consistently highlights the impact of imperialism and capitalism on land rights and national self-determination, arguing that agricultural development and sovereignty have to be confronted simultaneously and cannot be achieved in the face of perpetual external aggression and externally imposed economic arrangements that erode indigenous management and serve foreign interests above national imperatives.[98] This positioning emerges from the North African Arab history and context marked by denied sovereignty, anchored in the overlap between agrarian and national interests.[99] However, this reality is not reflected in the current rural social movements in Tunisia. Despite their macro-level importance for securing agricultural workers' and farmers' rights, the movements are not making clear connections to the national rural context, and national organizations do not directly refer to the LVC WANA delegation.[100]

Food sovereignty activists should consider the numerous agroecological initiatives that highlight the transformative effort necessary for food sovereignty as vital strategic allies. Efforts like the preservation of indigenous seeds by the Tunisian Association of Permaculture and the National Genebank in Tunisia, the Our Seeds, Our Roots association in Lebanon, and the Al Barakeh Wheat initiative in Jordan demonstrate a collective reclaiming of traditional knowledge and local control over food systems. Other regional initiatives, including Tunisian and Lebanese networks of agroecology, the Siyada Network, and the Arab Network for Food Sovereignty, are vital for promoting food sovereignty and agroecology, facilitating knowledge exchange, and advocating for regional solidarity.

Recommendations: In order to build a robust and farmer-led food sovereignty alliance, actors must:

Promote grassroots mobilization: CSOs and advocates should support small-scale farmers in moving beyond single-issue protests (e.g., water access) to form more structured, permanent organizations that can help develop a unified vision and enhance their visibility. This support can take the form of advocating for specific mechanisms within unions to guarantee the direct representation of small-scale farmers, thereby ensuring their interests are better presented and not overshadowed by those of large-scale producers.

- Build cohesive networks and regional alliances: Address the absence of cohesive, solidarity-based networks by actively integrating small-scale farmers into existing networks, and build and strengthen alliances across the Arab world to increase the international visibility and influence of farmer movements. By collaborating, regional groups can share solutions to common problems like water scarcity and neoliberal policies and provide mutual support during times of conflict. This will enable them to build a more resilient,

95 "Civil Society Group", 2025.

96 NGO representative, 2025.

97 Ajl, "Delinking, food sovereignty", 2018.

98 Ajl, M. "Post-dependency Perspectives on Agriculture in Tunisia", *Review of African Political Economy*, (2018).

99 Ajl, "Delinking, food sovereignty", 2018.

100 Researcher 1, 2025.

collaborative regional food system.

- Connect local struggles to global narratives: Ensure that the macro-level political arguments of international movements like LVC are clearly connected to the daily struggles of Tunisian farmers. This will make complex concepts like food sovereignty relevant and tangible at the national and local levels.
- Recognize and integrate agroecological initiatives: Food sovereignty advocates should view local agroecological projects not as isolated efforts, but as vital strategic allies in the movement. By actively supporting initiatives such as the preservation of indigenous seeds and collaborating with agroecology and food sovereignty networks, advocates can promote a collective reclaiming of traditional knowledge and local control.

In conclusion, food sovereignty, supported by agroecology, offers a robust framework to address the dual crises of climate change and global market dependency. By empowering local communities, fostering sustainable practices, and prioritizing self-determination over market dictates, this approach provides a coherent and actionable path toward resilient, equitable, and environmentally sound food systems. Realizing this vision in contexts like Tunisia requires overcoming internal divergences, fostering broader societal engagement, and strategically integrating regional and international advocacy with local small-scale farmers and grassroots agroecological implementation.

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About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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