

USAID/TUNISIA

CIVIL SOCIETY OUTREACH ANALYSIS

MARCH 21 – MARCH 25, 2022
Outreach Interview Sessions
CSO Analysis Report

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USAID/TUNISIA: CSO OUTREACH

INTRODUCTION

During the week of 21 March 2022, USAID/Tunisia conducted 45 interviews with a diverse roster of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) across Tunisia, spanning 15 cities in five days. Five separate regional clusters were the focus of CSO interviews.

- Djerba/Medenine
- Tataouine/Zarzis/Gabes
- Kebili/Tozeur/Gafsa/Sfax
- Sousse/Kairouan
- Beja/Tabarka

The USAID/Tunisia team also hosted several CSO roundtable discussions in Tunis, meeting with 15 CSOs. This report reflects the key outcomes and findings from those sessions.



The purpose of the outreach sessions was to engage CSOs to better understand their capacity, needs, and networks. The objectives of the sessions included:

- Shared understanding of Tunisia's CSO network, as well as the capacity and willingness of CSOs to work with other organizations and sectors;
- Shared understanding of CSOs' ability and experience with advocacy with government and other actors;
- Shared understanding of key issues facing priority constituent groups in the communities in which CSOs work; and
- Shared understanding and awareness of CSO financial sustainability, and ability for and sources of fundraising.

Figure 1: Cities visited across Tunisia

PROFILE OF CSO PARTICIPANTS

The majority of CSOs interviewed were founded between 2012 and 2018. Three CSOs were established between 2019 and the present day, while 23 were founded between 2012 and 2018. The year 2012 saw the greatest number of CSOs established (eight) in a single year. Eight of the CSOs interviewed were founded before 2011, with their missions ranging from children's rights to health awareness.

More than one-quarter (28.9%) of CSOs reported their focus was in the economic and social development sector, followed by youth empowerment (20.0%), and civic engagement (13.3%). Strikingly, nearly all CSOs work in more than one area with some working in as many as three or more sectors. The sectors mentioned most often were Women's Rights/GBV (55% of CSOs interviewed), workforce development (33%), and democratic strengthening (13%). Generally, organizations that worked on a wide range of issues received funding from several donors. The CSOs who were more focused on one theme tended to be funded by only one or two donors.

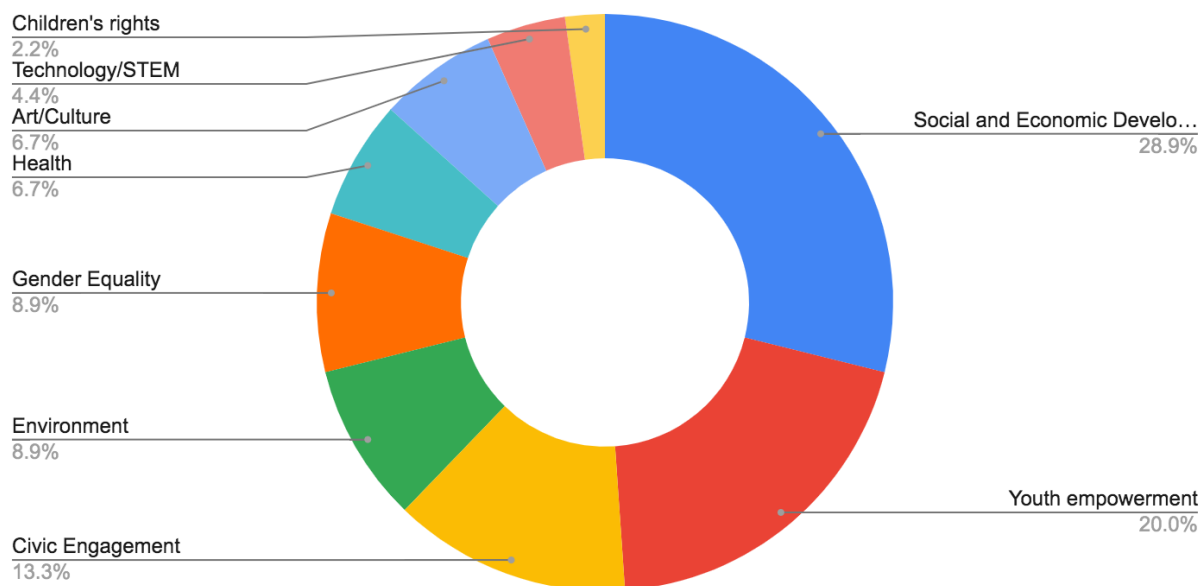


Figure 2: Main Focus Areas of the CSOs interviewed

TRENDS IMPACTING CSO SUCCESS

CSO interviews revealed several issues impacting the success of their organizations. COVID had a negative impact on many CSOs, forcing them to transition activities to virtual platforms for which many were unprepared. CSOs reported that online engagement was insufficient and civic participation dwindled during the pandemic's peak. In addition, many constituents do not use social media, posing another challenge for CSOs to remain engaged with their communities.

Many CSOs mentioned that access to government funds is essential but insufficient. Reaching financial sustainability is difficult for CSOs, especially the more nascent organizations, as access to funds can be limited. Still other CSOs reported that receiving public funds is a double edged sword -- fueling growth and sustainability but also inviting more scrutiny from government and potentially limiting their role as a civic watchdog. Applying for funding, both from public and international donors, as well as gaining access to support from the private sector, can be daunting and complicated, and without experienced or dedicated business development staff, these types of funds are often out of reach.

High levels of youth unemployment drive many CSOs to focus at the intersection of youth empowerment and workforce development. Despite this, apathy is pervasive among young people and many are leaving the country for better opportunities elsewhere. As many of these CSOs are fully run by volunteers and 100% self-funded, a volunteer spirit is necessary for success. But a lack of community engagement and volunteer mindset, not only among youth but among the public at large, is a major challenge for CSOs.

“YOUTH DON’T BELIEVE THAT CHANGE IS POSSIBLE - WE WANT THEM TO CHANGE THEIR MINDS, AND SHOW THEM THAT CHANGE IS POSSIBLE.”

Another key challenge emphasized by CSOs was the tension and resource inequality between ‘central’ and peripheral CSOs. Organizations based in Tunis or in other regional capitals are closer to policy and decision making and are often better resourced, although Tunis-based CSOs also reported that sustainable financing remains a challenge for them. There is a lack of connection or network between these CSOs and those working in more rural areas. Tunis-based CSOs recognized that they aren’t doing a good job of reaching out to smaller, nascent organizations in the outer reaches of the country. These city-based CSOs identified the need to cross pollinate with local groups and actors through peer exchanges and learning.

Other key challenges mentioned were:

- Skills gaps; while some CSOs do have technical expertise, most recognize there are areas where they could learn and do better. Tunis-based CSOs pointed out that skills transfer must go beyond the purely financial and should be tailored to the specific context of each CSO. Additional areas cited for support across CSOs include:
 - Project planning and project management
 - Communications and marketing
 - Grant and proposal writing
 - Technology basics and web site development
 - Data management
- Government bureaucracy at every level creates hurdles in their work, including

registration, applications for public funding, etc.

ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Of the 45 organizations surveyed, 31 reported that they engage in advocacy; two said they did no advocacy, and six did not answer.

The most popular advocacy topics mentioned were GBV and gender, environment, education, and civic engagement.

CSOs mentioned a variety of advocacy approaches and strategies to engage the public, including community meetings/large activities, coffee talks, town halls, Facebook and social media, youth centers, and going door-to-door. The key to success of any community engagement activity was building trust with the community. CSOs cited the importance of understanding community needs to develop a sustainable response. Tunis-based CSOs noted the importance of working with the non-formal sector, connecting to protest and other 'movements' which are important for visibility and can be combined with other forms of community engagement. They did emphasize, however, that foreign donor funds must not be used for social movements as it can be seen to pollute these efforts.

While most organizations reported engaging in advocacy there was some confusion on how they defined it. Some CSOs reported not engaging in advocacy but then listed a number of advocacy activities among their work, while others reported doing advocacy work but only conducted training activities.

“WE CANNOT WORK ON ADVOCACY ALONE. WE NEED TO WORK TOGETHER WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS - CITIZENS, PRIVATE SECTOR, AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES.”

Nearly all organizations said they work in partnership with others. The most common entities cited were local governments and municipalities followed by other CSOs/NGOs. While most CSOs work through local government, these relationships are often based on approval or 'green lighting' by the government and are not true collaboration or funding relationships. Both regional CSOs and organizations based in Tunis worked less often with the private sector as it was cited as a difficult partner to work with due to inaccessibility and the lack of a common platform. Tunis-based CSOs also mentioned a lack of awareness among the private sector on the opportunity or benefit a civil society partnership might provide.

CSOs reported a number of challenges to their advocacy work and community engagement, among them working against a perception of the wider public that civil society organizations

have failed in their work, despite their ongoing efforts. Many communities believe that CSOs are a substitute for government services. While this may have been the case years ago, the current mandate of CSOs has evolved but public perception has not evolved with it. This tarnished reputation extends to jobs, with society largely looking down upon CSO jobs in favor of private sector or government work. CSO positions are often seen only as a stepping stone to something better, rather than a career. Despite recognizing the importance of working with others, Tunis-based CSOs cited mixed experiences with coalition building and raising public awareness on the issues on which they work. Other challenges cited by CSOs were capacity building, and obtaining sufficient resources for advocacy.

FUNDRAISING SOURCES

Nearly half (45%) of the CSOs interviewed said they **relied on** international donors for funding, while just over 20% said they were self-funded. Most CSOs do not have year-round forms of income, instead using volunteers, citing that it would be challenging to be financially sustainable otherwise. More than 20% of CSOs interviewed said they utilize membership fees but that the fees are rarely enough to cover all operating expenses. The private sector offers some support, but it is minimal, and applying for government and international funds is cumbersome and time-consuming. Of the 45 non-Tunis based NGOs interviewed, only 12 had not received any form of funding from international donors. However, the majority of CSOs who received funds from international donors only received one grant or contract, which illustrates that Tunisian CSOs are still quite grassroots and that there is room for additional donor support, as long as it is empowering local groups, complementary and not distortive. Many CSOs are also seeking ways to diversify their fundraising efforts and would like to expand beyond receiving international donor funds after being contacted directly by the donor.

CSOs cited that training their staff in certain professional skills would be one of the most effective ways to diversify their fundraising sources. Staff training in accounting and financial management, digital marketing and communications, networking, project management, proposal writing, and English language skills would enable CSOs to pursue additional funding opportunities directly from USAID and other international donors. Burdensome application processes for funding from international donors and the Government of Tunisia have prompted CSOs to consider charging fees for formerly pro-bono services. Others suggested they could seek to develop CSO incubators and leverage in-kind donations of office space and event venues as alternatives to traditional forms of fundraising.

A proposed revision of Decree 88 has many CSOs worried. The draft version would likely lead to increased difficulties, potentially forcing some CSOs to cease operations.