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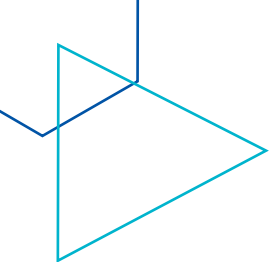
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HIGHLIGHTS: THIRD WAVE APRIL 2021

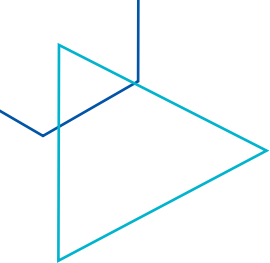
Rapid Labour Force Survey of COVID-19 Impact in Tunisia

Published in October 2021



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Introduction¹

This document summarises the key findings of the third wave of rapid labour force surveys conducted by ILO and ERF between March 15th and April 16th 2021 in Tunisia to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on households, household enterprises and farmers. This report is part of series of panel surveys that track the evolution of the pandemic in Tunisia's labour market. The survey was conducted by phone, using a random digital dialling (RDD) approach, and targeted mobile owners aged 18 to 64.

A sample of 2,000 interviews was collected in the first wave in November 2020. Ninety-six per cent of these respondents consented to being re-interviewed as part of the second wave, 64.7 per cent (1,294 of 2,000) was reached. An additional refresher sample of 783 individuals was, therefore, added, using RDD methods, to reach a total of 2,077 interviews. Around 98 per cent of the respondents in the second wave agreed (2,044 out of 2,077) to be followed up in the third wave, and 77.7 per cent were then successfully interviewed. A refresher sample of 444 individuals was added to reach a total of 2,057² respondents.

The survey produces data over three reference periods. The “baseline” pre-COVID situation is defined in February 2020 and is measured retrospectively as part of wave 1 for the panel sample or wave 3 for the refresher sample. Depending on the variable, the “current” situation is defined as the situation in either the previous month or the previous week.

The sample is weighted by considering households' demographics, the prevalence of mobile phones in Tunisia and the numbers of mobile phones in each household. For the panel data, the attrition probability is computed and also considered in calculating the weights. The survey methodology and phone call outcomes are presented in more detail in the Annex.

The household questionnaire covers demographic and household characteristics, labour market status, education, food security, incomes, social safety nets, attitudes towards risks and social distancing, coping strategies, and mental health. It includes a core module, an individual module, a worker module, a farmer module, a household enterprise module, a women module, and a tracking module. A more detailed presentation of findings will follow this report.



¹ Data used in this report are the cross-sectional data of the three waves.

² Only individuals of the second wave with consent were re-contacted in the third wave.



Key Findings

- ▶ A substantial flow of formerly inactive persons has entered the labour market since the onset of the epidemic (+22% in April compared to pre-COVID levels), driving up unemployment (+30%) and employment shares (+10%). Unemployment rate in April stood at 19 per cent, slightly receding from its high observed in November 2020 and February 2021. Coupled with the observed contraction in wage earnings this is symptomatic of distress employment, as households need additional members to work to meet income shortages.
- ▶ Employment trends among males and females parallel each other, with both men and women experiencing higher unemployment and significant increases in economic activity rates. These shifts are slightly more pronounced among the women population.
- ▶ Tunisians with secondary or tertiary education are more affected by the surge in unemployment than persons with lower educational attainment.
- ▶ The decreasing gap between the standard measure of unemployment and unemployment rate that includes persons not actively seeking a job indicates that more persons have started to actively seek jobs, on account either of fewer restrictions to movement or of increasing expectations around job search.
- ▶ Losses in incomes compared to the pre-COVID period are still reported by more than 40 per cent of respondents, similarly to the February 2021 observation and down ten points from the high observed in November 2020. The share of those reporting losses of more than 25 per cent has shrunk in favour of those reporting milder losses. The percentage of households reporting they could not buy the usual amount of food on account of income losses remains above 70 per cent, only a 5 point decrease since November. Households continue to take money out of savings and turning to friends and relatives as their most common coping strategies.
- ▶ On average, nominal wages have progressed by 1 percent between February 2020 and April 2021, while inflation for the year 2020 has been reported to be at around 5 per cent. Nominal decreases in wages in agriculture, accommodation and food services are reported, while in retail and wholesale, construction and manufacturing nominal increases matched the inflation rate. Increases in the wages of workers with secondary attainment have more than matched the inflation rate; among those with basic education a nominal decrease of -7 per cent has been observed. Female workers appear to have suffered slightly more than male workers, while no major differentials between public and private sectors, or formal and informal work, has been observed.
- ▶ Among the active surveyed businesses in February 2020, there is a slight indication of recovery as the percentage who reported a recent decrease in their sales/revenue dropped from 87 per cent in February 2021 to 80 per cent in April 2021.
- ▶ Business sentiment had improved between November 2020 and February 2021, but slid back since. By April 2020 60 per cent of businesses expected lower revenues in 2021 as compared to pre-COVID (2019).
- ▶ Government supported business loans are the most commonly cited form of public support required by entrepreneurs.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Tunisia

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the existing economic and social challenges that the Tunisian economy has been facing following the 2011 revolution. Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is estimated to have fallen by 7 percent in 2020. It is expected to rebound in 2021 by 3.8 per cent³. Figure 1 presents the epidemiological trend in Tunisia and the primary containment and socio-economic policy responses adopted by the Government. The first COVID-19 case in Tunisia was recorded on 2 March 2020. The spread of the virus remained under control the following weeks in line with sanitary measures, a strict lockdown declared in March, with movements limited to work and essential needs. Partial reopening measures were introduced in June. COVID-19 cases rapidly grew as of August. New restrictions were then imposed in the fall⁴. In March 2021 the government launched a vaccination campaign that aims to cover 50 per cent of the population over 18 years old. Priority was given to health workers, the elderly and people with underlying health conditions. As of 25 July, around 2.6 million people have been fully vaccinated⁵.

As part of Tunisia's economic and social response, the Central Bank (CBT) reduced its key interest rate in March and then again in October 2020, by a cumulative 125 basis points; and eased credit risk rules. The CBT requested that banks defer payments on existing loans and suspend any electronic payments and withdrawals fees. The CBT also asked banks to postpone loan reimbursement by households for three to six months, depending on the net revenue level. Loan repayments for businesses in the tourism sector were deferred to September 2021. On the fiscal side, the Government of Tunisia announced a TND 2.6 billion (US\$928 million) emergency plan in March 2020, including value-added tax (VAT) exemptions, the rescheduling of taxes and custom arrears, and liquidity easing measures. Cash transfers for low-income households, disabled and homeless persons were introduced to the tune of TND 450 million. Special unemployment benefits were also made available for an amount of TND 300 million. The 2021 budget law involves several measures to support the most affected enterprises and sectors, including an extension of the state guarantee scheme to the end of 2021.

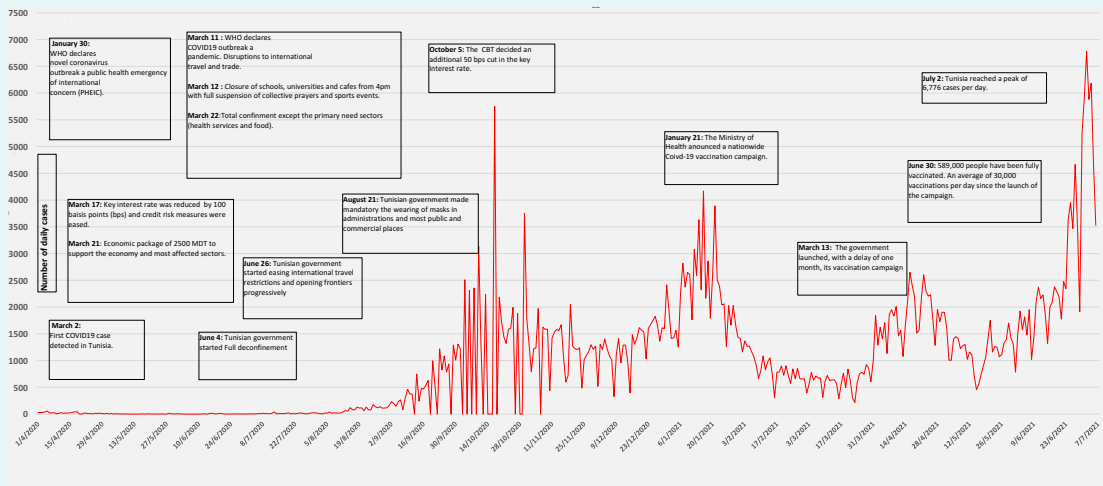


³ IMF. 2021. "Tunisia: 2020 Article IV Consultation-Press Release." January.

⁴ IMF. 2021. "Policy Responses to COVID-19, Policy Tracker Database." June.

⁵ WHO. 2021. "COVID-19, Vaccinations' Database." July.

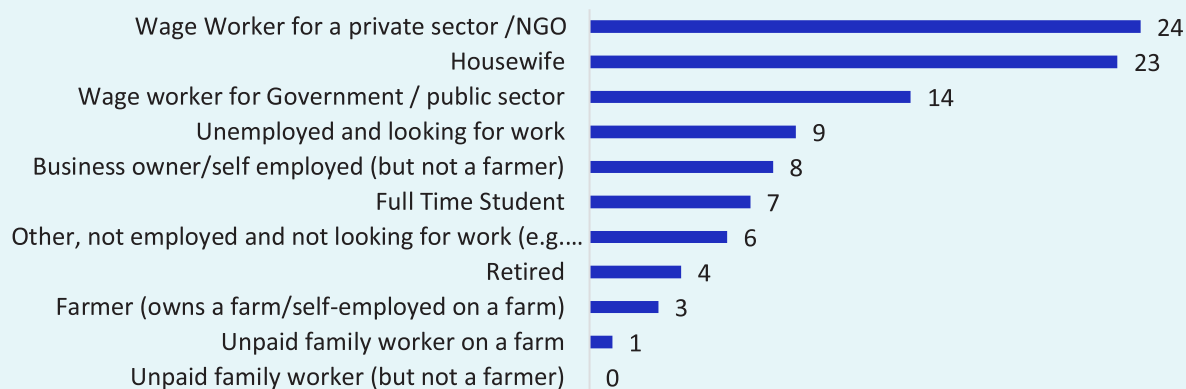
► **Figure 1: COVID-19 case trends in Tunisia and government response**



Source: Constructed by authors using the WHO COVID-19 Database.

Figure 2 Illustrates the distribution of Tunisian participants in the third wave of the ERF COVID-19 survey with respect to their job activity in February 2020.

► **Figure 2: Percentage distribution of respondents in February 2021, by main job/activity, as of February 2020**



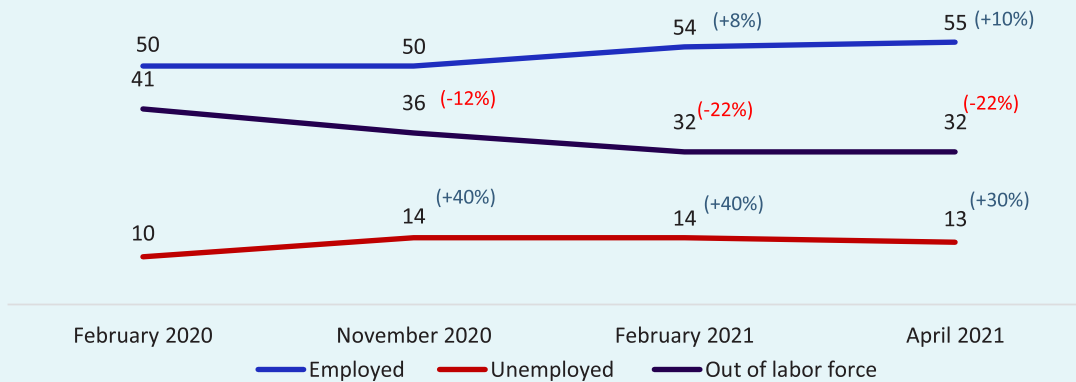
Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

► Employment and unemployment

A substantial flow of formerly inactive persons has entered the labour market since the onset of the epidemic (+22% in April compared to pre-COVID levels), driving up unemployment (+30%) and employment share (+10%) (Figure 3).

Data in Figure 4 shows that Tunisians with secondary and tertiary education are most affected by increasing unemployment shares throughout the three waves of this survey, whereas individuals with lowest education have returned to employment (but with lower earnings, see Incomes section).

► **Figure 3:** Percentage change in labour force distribution, February 2020–April 2021⁶(%)

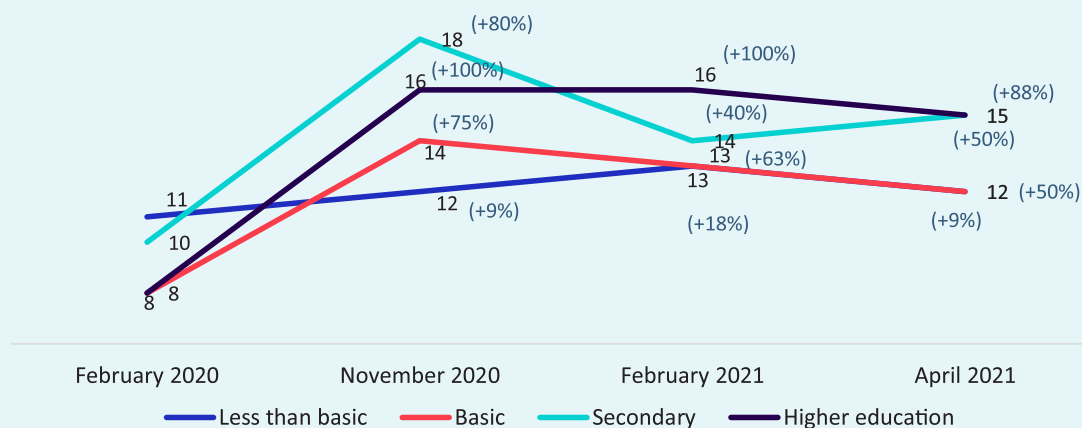


Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.



⁶ Labour force status in February 2020 is constructed for the respondents of the three waves.

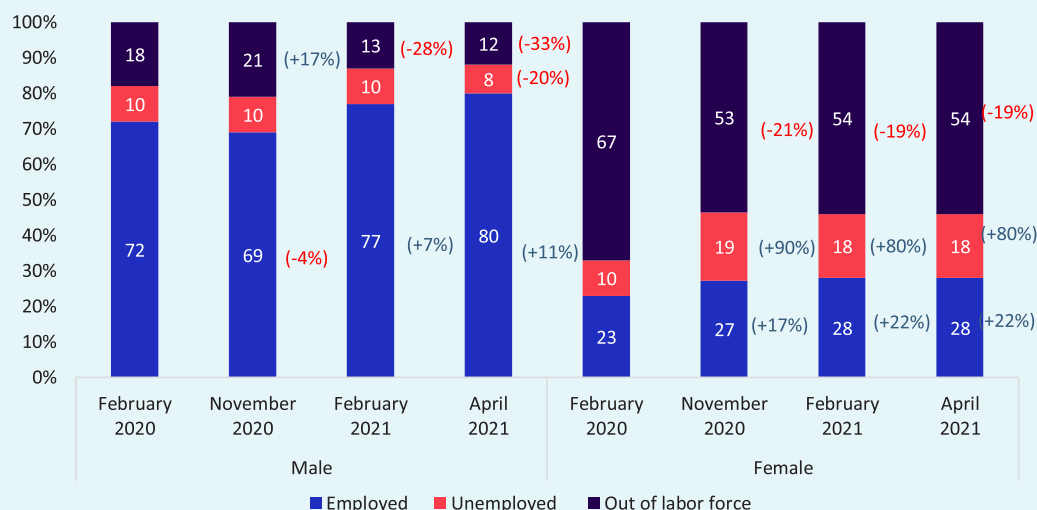
► **Figure 4:** Percentage change in population unemployment share, by educational attainment, February 2020–April 2021(%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Shifts between inactivity, unemployment and employment have been more pronounced among females since the beginning of the pandemic. Male respondents were much less affected by unemployment than their female counterparts, coupled with a constant rise in male labour force participation from one wave to another. It is worth noting that despite the increase in female employment share by 22 per cent in April 2021 compared to February 2020, unemployment among females still rose by 80 per cent between both periods (Figure 5).

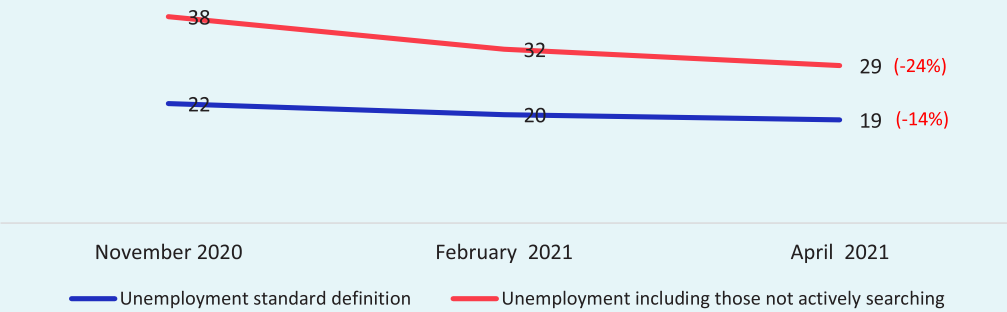
► **Figure 5:** Percentage change in labour market status, by sex, February 2020–April 2021



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Unemployment rate in April stood at 19 per cent, slightly receding from its high observed in November 2020 and February 2021. Coupled with the observed contraction in wage earnings this is symptomatic of distress employment, as households need additional members to work to meet income shortages. The closing gap between the two observed definitions of unemployment is indicative of easing constraints to look for jobs (Figure 6).

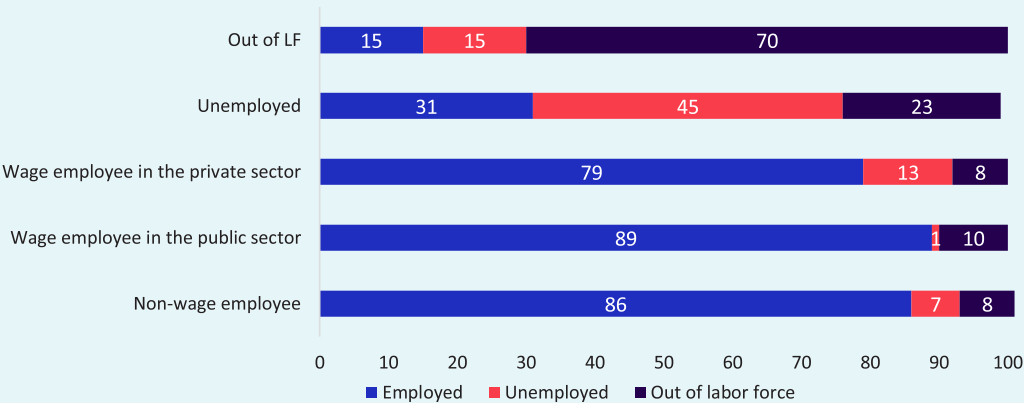
► **Figure 6:** Unemployment rates in November 2020-April 2021, standard definition (in blue) and including those not actively searching (in red), %



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Observing simultaneously Figure 7 and Figure 8 allows us to assess the labour markets transitions that firstly occurred between February 2020 and November 2020 and in April 2021. A lower percentage of unemployed individuals in February 2020 remained unemployed in April 2021 (32 per cent), compared to November 2020 (45 per cent). Wage employees in the public sector appear to be less likely to fall in unemployment compared to the private sector employees.

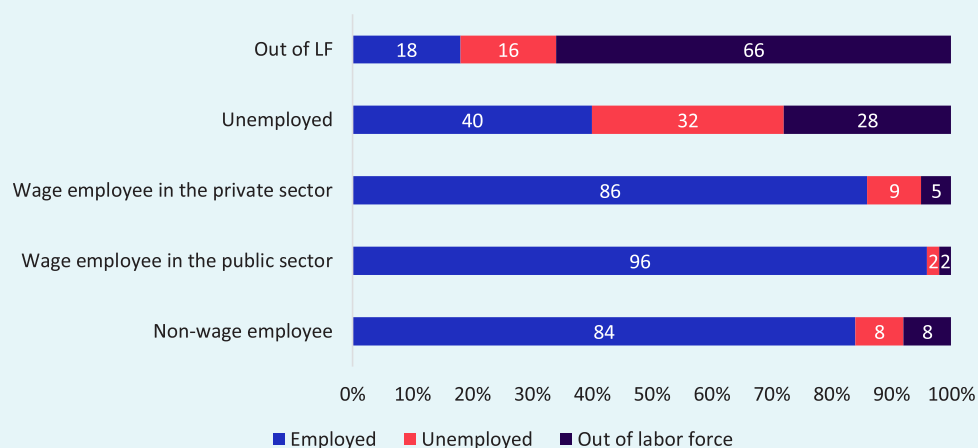
► **Figure 7:** Labour market transitions, February 2020–November 2020 (Situation of working-age individuals in November as per their situation in February)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

³ Non-waged-workers include the self-employed (28 per cent), employers/self-employed (70 per cent), and unpaid family workers (2 per cent).

► **Figure 8:** Labour market transitions, February 2020–April 2021 (Situation of working-age individuals in April as per their situation in February)

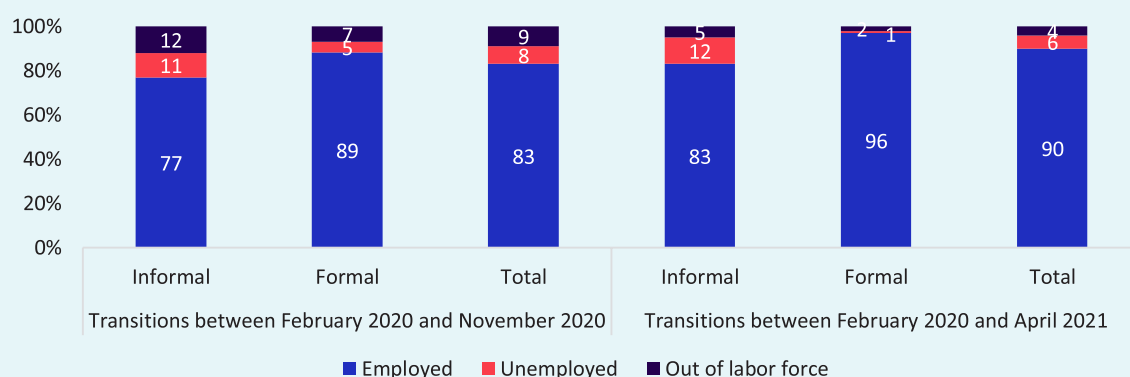


Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Note: Non-wage employees includes self-employed, employers, and unpaid family workers.

Workers in informal jobs in February 2020 have been much more likely to become unemployed than those in formal jobs (Figure 9). By April 2021, all but 4 per cent of those in formal jobs were employed, while 17 per cent of those in informal jobs were out of work.

► **Figure 9:** Labour market transitions, of formal and informal⁷ wage employees, February 2020–November 2020 and February 2020–April 2021 (Situation of working-age individuals in November 2020 and April 2021 as per their situation in February 2021)

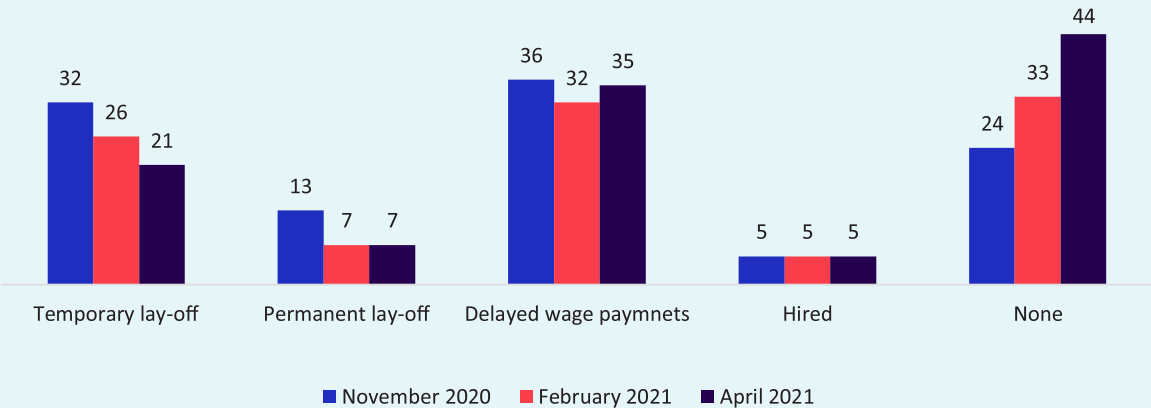


Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

⁷ Formality is defined as workers benefitting from social insurance. As of February 2020, 39 per cent of the wage employees were working in the government, where 76 per cent of them were formal employees. While 61 per cent were in the private sector, of which 40 per cent were formal employees.

About a third of workers surveyed continue to report delays in receiving their wage payments. The share of those suffering temporary layoffs has dropped significantly since November 2020, but still standing at 20 per cent in April 2021 (Figure 10).

► **Figure 10:** In the last 60 days, have you experienced any of the following because of COVID-19 or related restrictions? (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

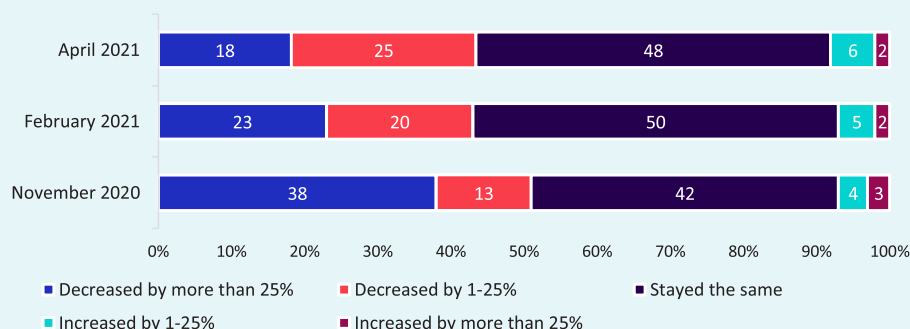
Note: Multiple answers are allowed.



► Wages and income⁸

When comparing Households' total monthly income observed along the different waves with a pre-COVID-19 time point, we find a shift in trends between the respondents reporting a 1-25% decrease in total monthly income and those suffering more than a 25 per cent drop in incomes. This result suggests that incomes are still on a downward path and are far from their pre-COVID-19 levels although the severity of the income decrease is attenuating (Figure 11).

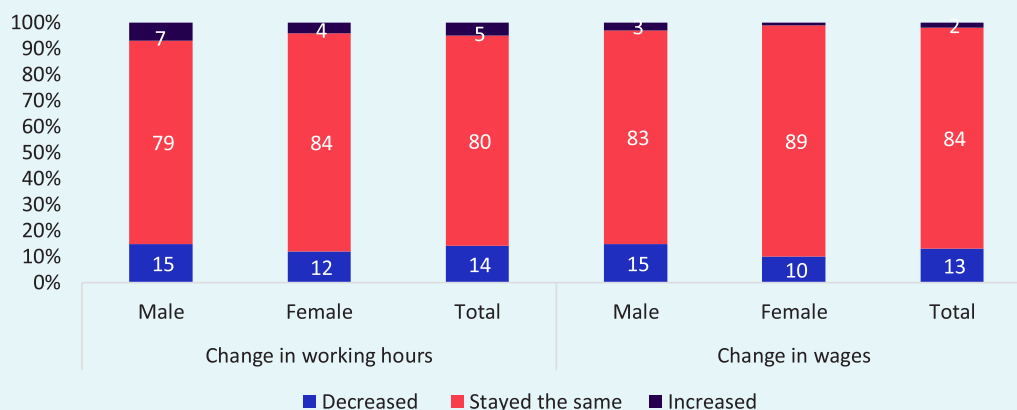
► **Figure 11:** Households' total monthly income change, compared to February 2020



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

In the last 60 days preceding the survey, male wage employees were slightly more affected by changes in wages and working hours (Figure 12).

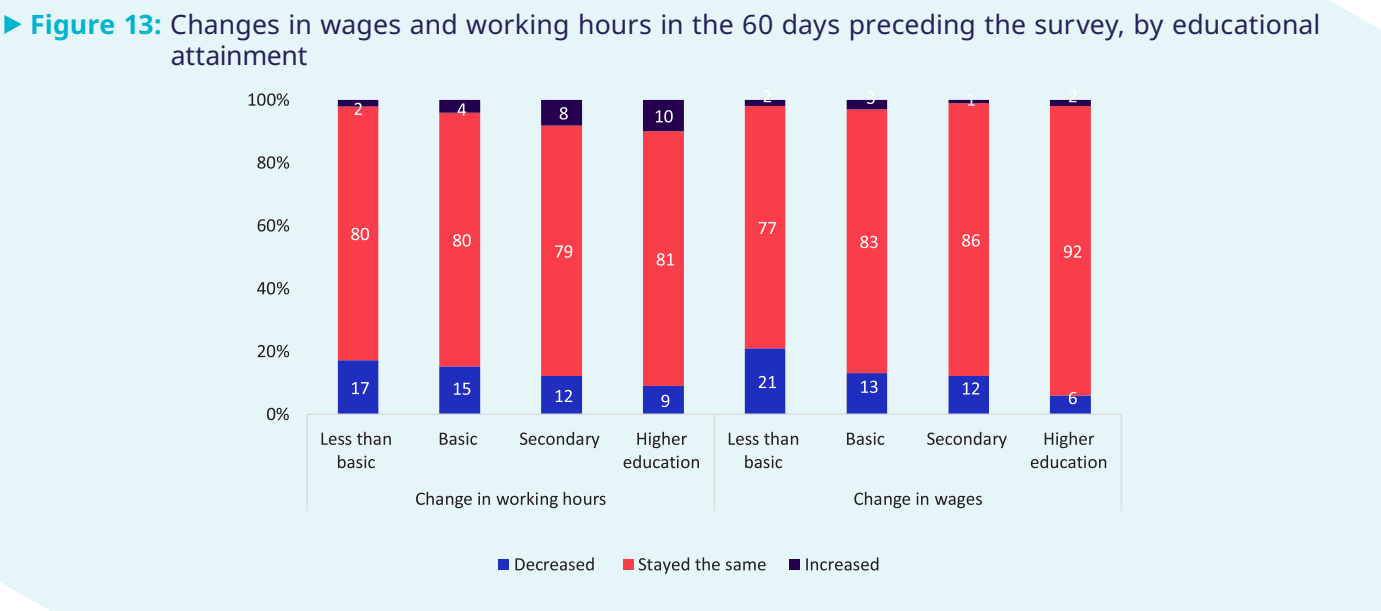
► **Figure 12:** Changes in wages and working hours in the 60 days preceding the survey, by sex



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Declines in wages and hours worked are negatively correlated with educational attainment; those with higher education faced the least variations in wages and working hours.

⁸ Analysis is based on those who were wage employees in February 2020.



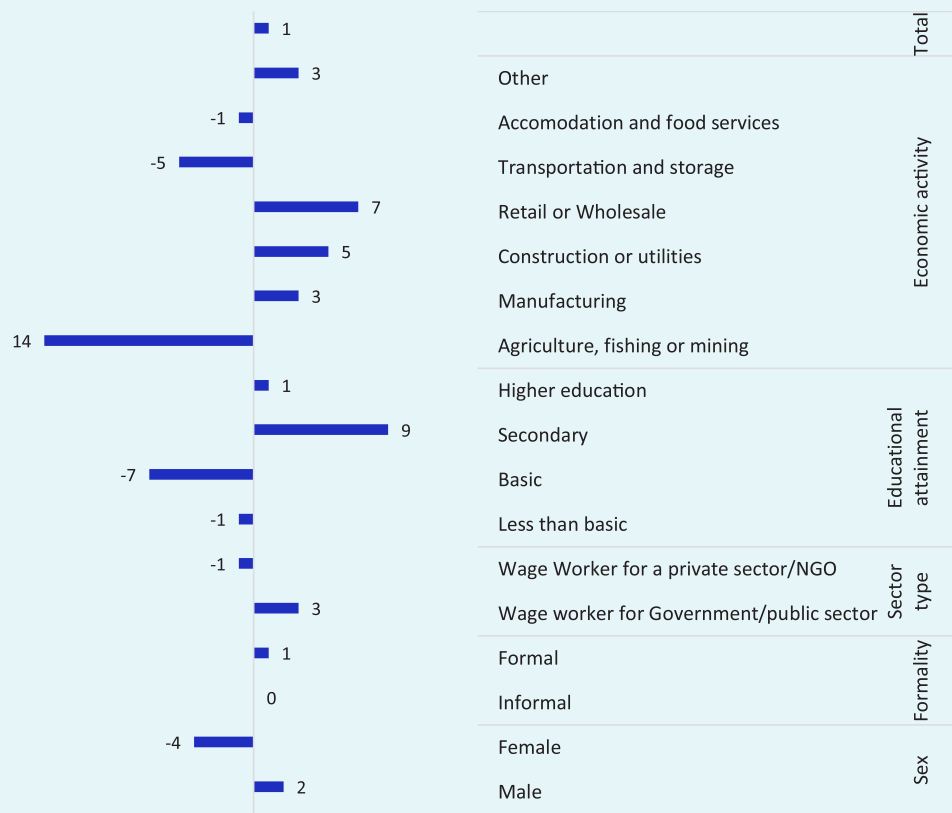
Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

On average, nominal wages have progressed by 1 per cent between February 2020 and April 2021, while inflation for the year 2020 has been estimated at 5 per cent. Nominal decreases in wages in agriculture, accommodation and food services are reported, while in retail and wholesale, construction and manufacturing nominal increases matched the inflation rate. Increases in the wages of workers with secondary attainment have more than matched the inflation rate; among those with basic education a nominal decrease of -7 per cent has been observed. Female workers appear to have suffered slightly more than male workers, while no major differentials between public and private sectors, or formal and informal work, has been observed (Figure 14)⁹.



⁹ The economic activity and sector are based on February 2020 status.

► **Figure 14:** Average percentage change in nominal wages¹⁰ by sex, educational attainment, formality, sector type, economic (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

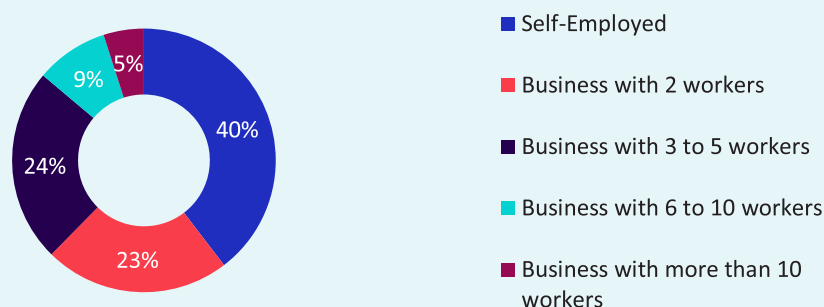


¹⁰ The inflation rate in March 2021 compared to February 2020 is 105.6.
Source: <http://dataportal.ins.tn/en/DataAnalysis?gAj1iU6wZUWdjTbI0sIKMg>

► Entrepreneurs and small businesses¹¹

Among the surveyed businesses, 47 per cent had 2 to 5 workers and 40 per cent were self-employed individuals in February 2020 (Figure 15).

► **Figure 15:** Percentage distribution of enterprises, by number of workers in February 2020

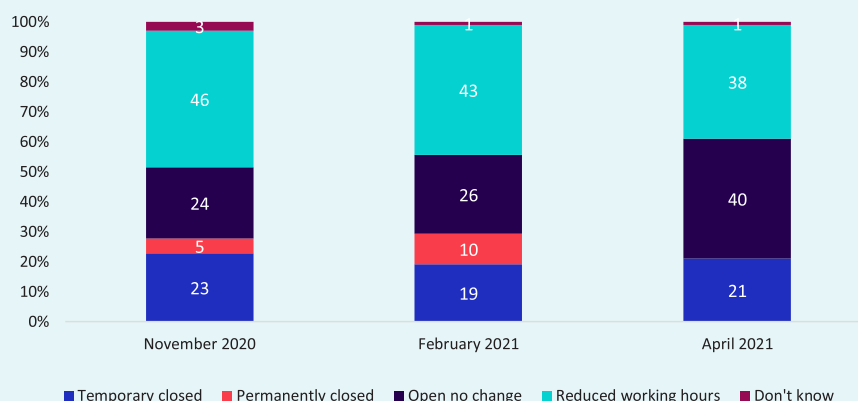


Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

The percentage of firms that reported a reduction in working hours has been dropping from 46 per cent in November 2020 to 38 per cent in April 2021. We can also notice an upward trend in the percentage of enterprises reporting no changes (Figure 16).

Reported permanent and temporary layoffs, and delayed wage payments have decreased since the levels registered in November 2020 (Figure 17).

► **Figure 16:** Percentage distribution of enterprises' current status



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

¹¹ Analysis is based on those who were business owners in February 2020.

► **Figure 17:** Reported changes due to COVID-19 outbreak and related restrictions (%)

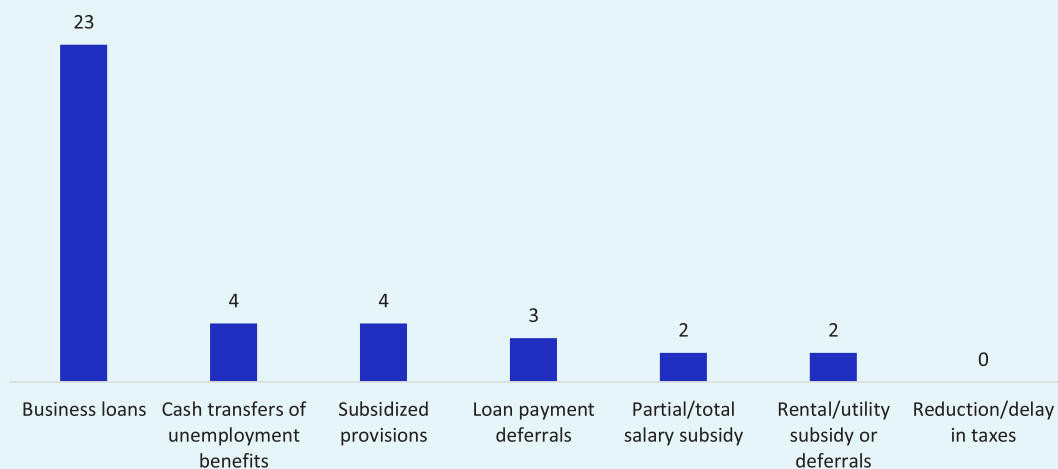


Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Note: Changes reported only for employers.

In April 2021, business loans appear to be the most applied and requested policy support among Tunisian employers, followed by unemployment benefits and subsidized provisions (Figure 18, Figure 19).

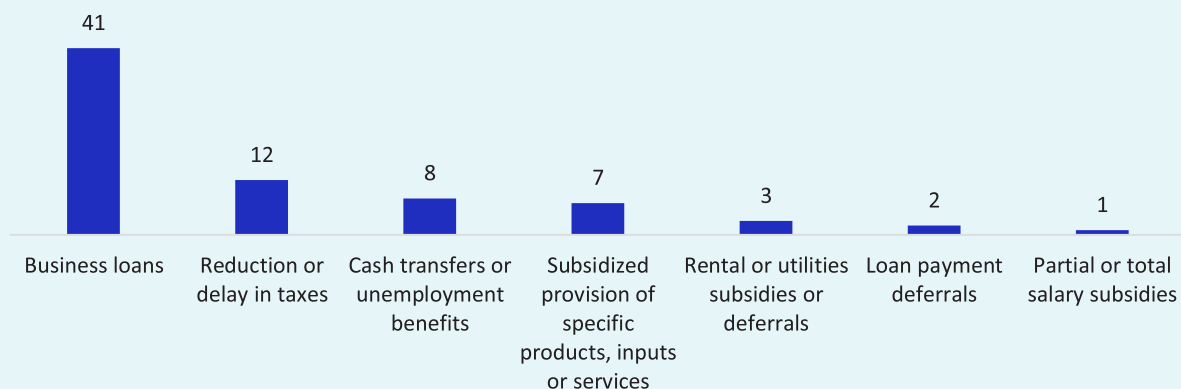
► **Figure 18:** Percentage of employers or business-owners who applied for or currently receive any government support



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Note: Multiple answers are allowed.

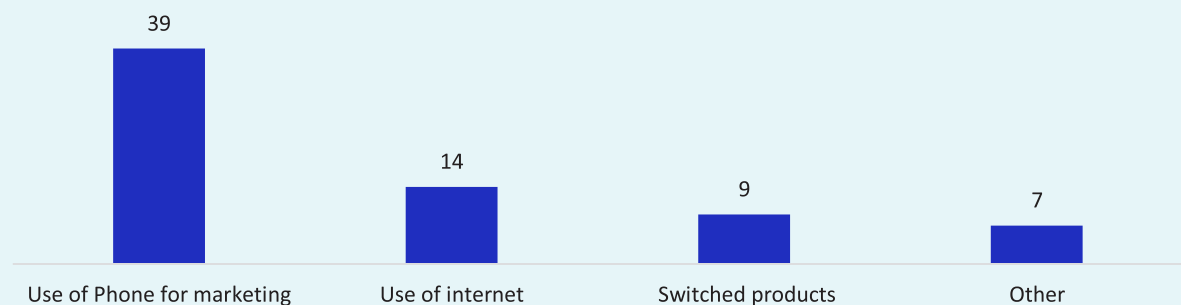
► **Figure 19:** Employers' or business-owners' most-requested policy support for COVID-19 (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

The use of phone for marketing and business continues to be the most adopted strategy to reduce physical proximity with customers, recording 39 per cent in April 2021 (Figure 20).

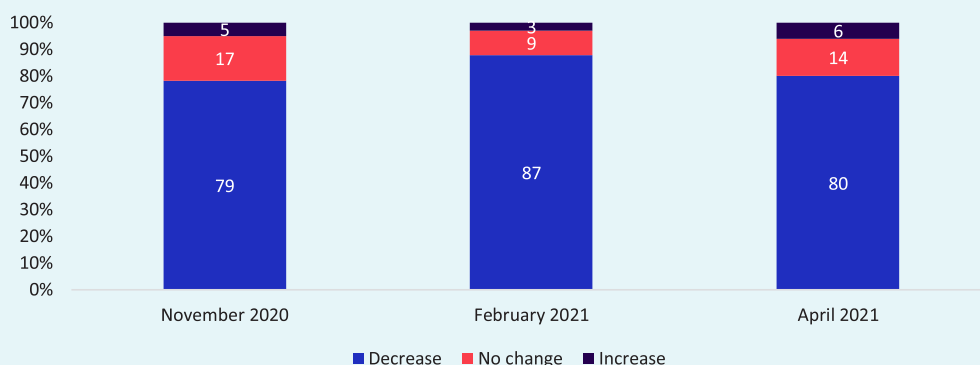
► **Figure 20:** Businesses' strategies to reduce physical proximity with customers (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

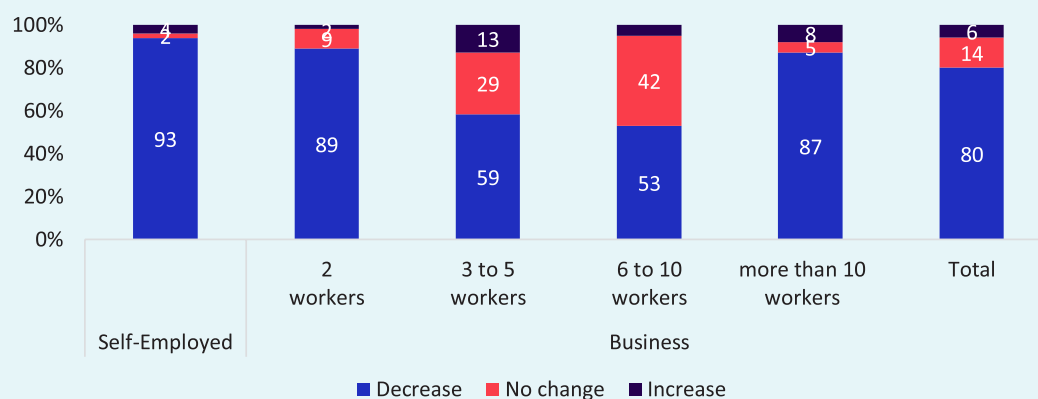


► **Figure 21:** Average change in sales/revenues in the last 60 days compared to sales/revenue in the same period last year in November 2020 to April 2021



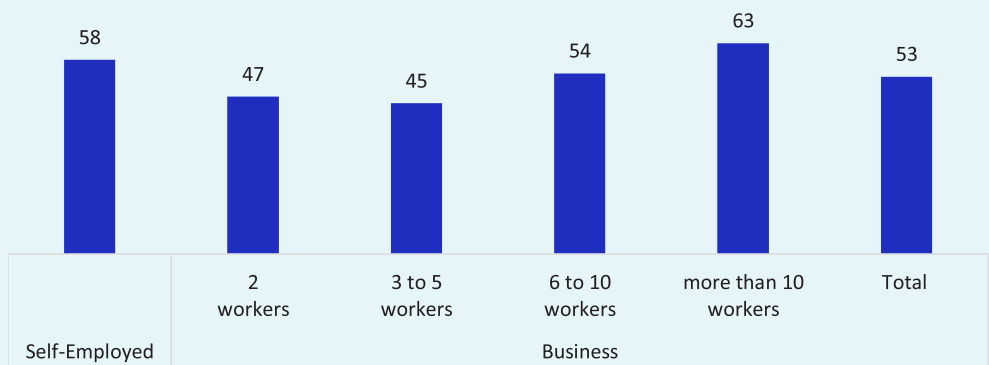
After an increase in the percentage of surveyed businesses reporting a reduction in the sales/revenue in February 2021 to 87 per cent compared to 79 per cent, by April 2021, it dropped again to 80 per cent (Figure 21). The magnitude of decline remained at an average of 53 per cent over time. Self-employers were hit the most, with 93 per cent reporting a decrease in sales, compared to the same period last year (Figure 22 , Figure 23).

► **Figure 22:** Change in sales/revenues in the 60 days preceding the survey compared to sales/revenue in the same period last year, by enterprise size



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

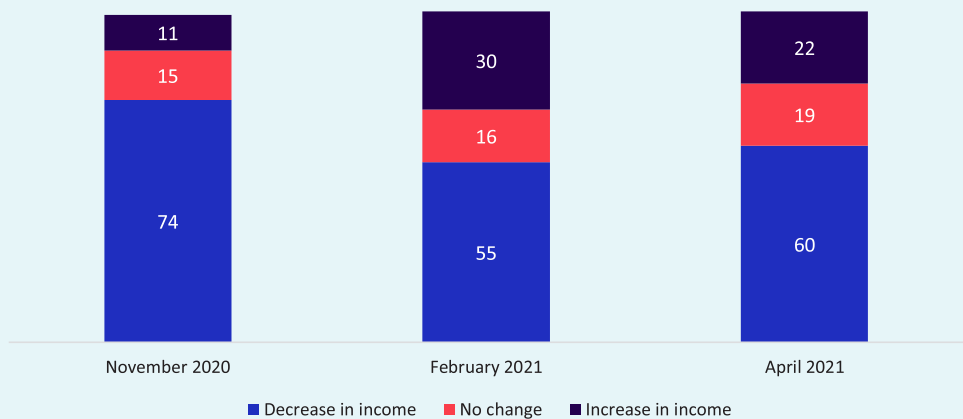
► **Figure 23:** Average decrease in sales/revenue reported by enterprises, by enterprise size (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Business sentiment had improved between November 2020 and February 2021, but slid back since. By April 2021, 60 percent of businesses expected lower revenues in 2021 as compared to pre-COVID levels (2019).

► **Figure 24:** Sales expectations for 2021 compared to 2019, by wave



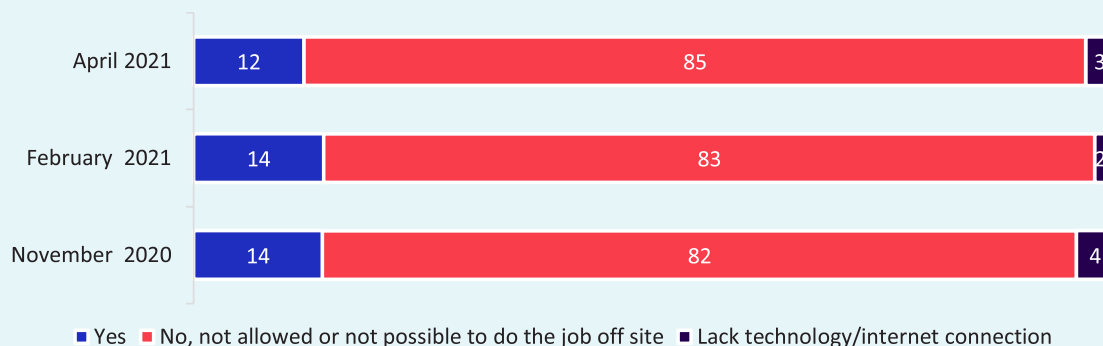
Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor .



► Shift to online and home-based work

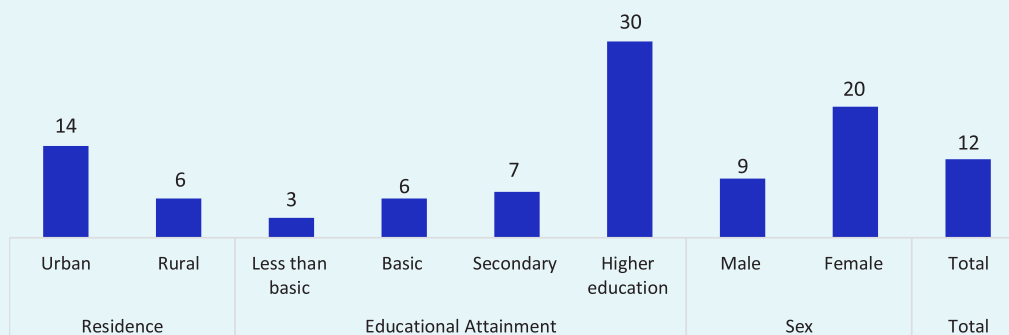
The ability of workers to work from home remains fairly stable, with only a slight decrease since February 2021, pointing to some returns to normal work arrangements among certain businesses (Figure 24). Urban residents, females and the highly educated are those most likely to work remotely or from their home (Figure 26).

► **Figure 25:** Ability to work from home, by wave



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

► **Figure 26:** Ability to work from home, by residence, sex, and educational attainment (%)

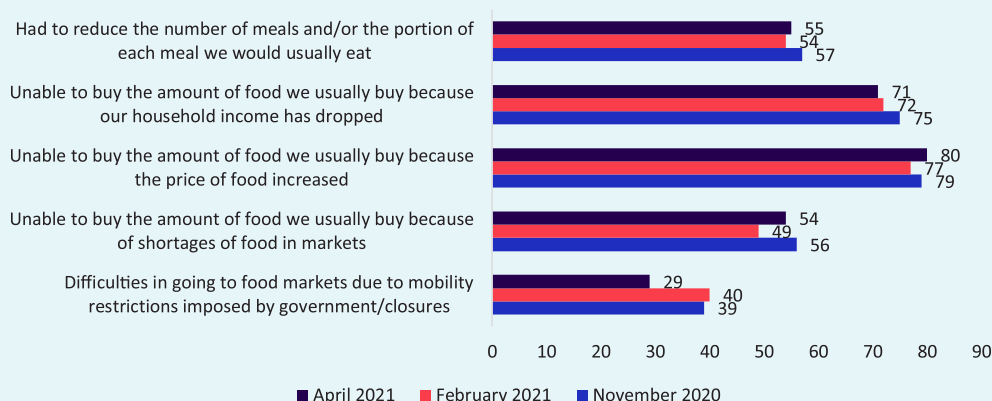


Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

► Have you had to...? Household coping strategies

No significant improvements in household's food consumption is noticeable in April 2021. While physical mobility restrictions have improved, 70 per cent of household indicate they do not buy the usual amount of food due to income reductions.

► **Figure 27:** Food security: In the past 7 days, have you or any household member experienced any of the following? (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Withdrawing money from their savings and turning to friends and relatives remain the most common coping strategies adopted by Tunisian households (Figure 28).

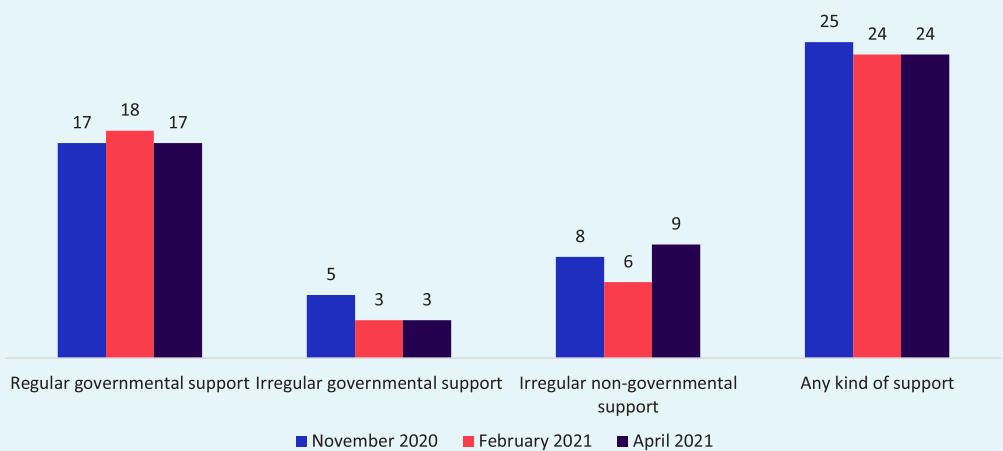
► **Figure 28:** Did you need to resort to any of these coping strategies since the end of February 2020? (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

Around a quarter of households are receiving some form of support from government or non-government organizations (Figure 29).

► **Figure 29:** Which kind of support did you receive in the past month? (%)



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.

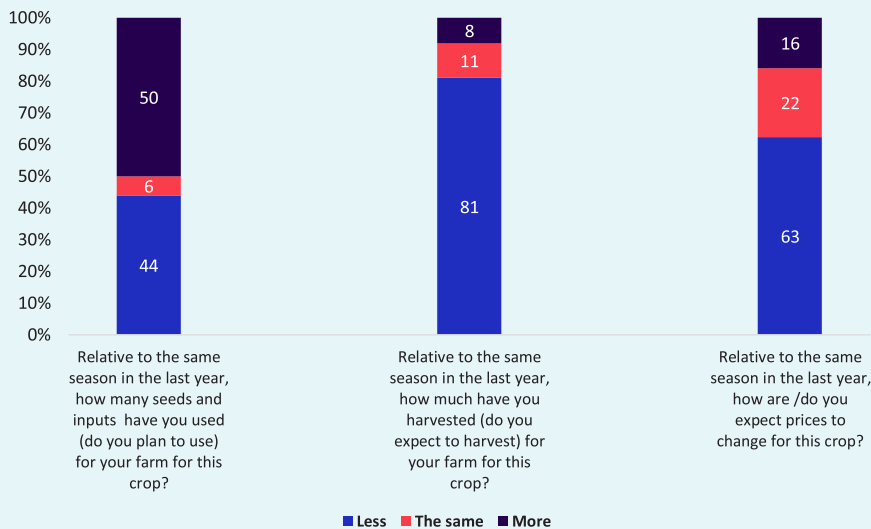
Around a quarter of households are receiving some form of support from government or non-government organizations (Figure 29).



Farmers

Three-quarters (75 per cent) of farmers in February 2020 kept their economic status as farmers in April 2021. Although half of the farmers were able to use more seeds and inputs for their crops, around 81 per cent have harvested/expect to harvest less, and 63 per cent expect lower prices for their crops, compared to the same season last year (Figure 30).

► **Figure 30:** Relative to the same season in the last year, how much have you harvested (do you expect to harvest) for your farm for this crop?



Source: Constructed by authors using the ILO/ERF COVID-19 Monitor.



Appendix

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a particular challenge for low- and middle-income countries, as well as vulnerable groups, such as informal and casual workers and those engaged in survival self-employment. Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of residents of countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is critically essential to designing and assessing policy responses to the crisis and formulating plans for an equitable and sustained recovery. This survey, and the subsequent series of short panel phone surveys, are planned to monitor the effects of the crisis on households in Tunisia.

The sample for the household survey were mobile phone users aged 18–64. Random digit dialling, within the range of valid numbers, was used, with up to three attempts if a phone number was not picked up/answered, was disconnected or busy, or picked up, but the respondent could not complete the interview at that time. Samples were stratified by country-specific market shares of mobile operators.

For follow-up waves, previous wave respondents were re-contacted if they consented to follow-up in the previous wave. Up to three attempts were used, including contacting second and family/friend numbers, if provided in wave one, on the third call. If the individual could not be reached or refused, a refresher individual was added to the sample in their place, randomly selected as with base wave respondents.

Inverse probability weighting was undertaken to reduce bias along with several observable dimensions. Weights were created on three levels: individual, household, and household member. Weights had the following inputs:

- Telephone operators and their market shares, provided by the data-collection firm
- Number of phones by the operator for individuals (individual weight) and household members (household weight and household member weight)
- Representative data with comparable demographic and household characteristics to weigh for non-responses

The panel attrition models use a few base wave variables in addition to those used for initial weighting. A specific additional variable is:

- Telephone operator
- Household income (categorically) in February 2020
- Base wave labour market status (employed, unemployed (search required), out of labour force)
- Interactions with sex for categorical income and base wave labour market status

The refresher weights are created in an identical fashion to the base wave, initial weights, but for the refresher samples within the subsequent waves of the panel.

For subsequent waves (waves after the base wave), cross-sectional weights combine the panel and refresher data. Weights are normalized to one within each of the panel and refresher samples and then combined into a single, representative cross-sectional weight.

All respondents who consented (2,044 of 2,077) to follow up in the prior wave were contacted in an attempt to include them in the subsequent wave. Varying degrees of follow-up occurred; 77.7 per cent (1,613 of 2,044) February 2021 respondents in Tunisia were successfully tracked to April 2021.

► **Table 1:** Phone calls outcomes for Tunisia panel sample

Result of call first try	n	col%
Phone disconnected/ busy Try for up to 3 times	66	3.2
Not in service	52	2.5
Did not answer try for up to 3 times	116	5.7
Picked up and refused	168	8.2
Incomplete, and refused	28	1.4
Incomplete, and call returned try for up to 3 times	1	0.1
Complete	1613	78.9
Total	2044	100

For the refresher sample, around 6,022 random numbers were generated as a refresher individual, of which two thirds were not in service. The total sample size of those who completed the survey was 444.

After excluding phones that were not in service, disconnected/busy (after multiple calls), and individuals who were not eligible from the response rate calculations, the response rates in the panel and refresher samples are 84 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively.

► **Table 2:** Phone calls outcomes for Tunisia refresher sample

Result of call first try	n	col%
Phone disconnected/ busy Try for up to 3 times	1201	20
Not in service	2617	44
Did not answer try for up to 3 times	883	15
Picked up and refused	623	10
Incomplete, and refused	151	3
Incomplete, and call returned try for up to 3 times	7	0
Complete	444	7
Not Eligible	96	2
Total	6022	100

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