

# YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND MIGRATION



International  
Labour  
Office

## COUNTRY BRIEF: TUNISIA





## Youth labour market overview

Youth between 15 and 29 years of age represent 28.4 per cent of the 10.7 million population of Tunisia<sup>i</sup>. It is widely recognized that this young generation has been the main driving-force behind the social and political upheaval that has led to the fall of Ben Ali's government in January 2011. Today, their persistent discontent, in particular as regards labour market prospects, could weigh on the political and social transition of the country. Above all, youth employment remains a great challenge for Tunisia.

The high unemployment rate of young workers reported over the past decade soared from 27.5 per cent in 2010 to 40 per cent in 2011<sup>ii</sup>. This is significantly higher than the unemployment rate of the overall population that passed from an average of 13 per cent until 2010 to 18.3 per cent in 2011. The situation remains daunting in spite of the slight improvement recorded in the first semester of 2013.

The spring revolution, the Libyan crisis and difficult economic times can only partly explain the explosion of youth unemployment. Structural constraints also play a major role. Poor economic growth, the low capacity of the Tunisian economy to create jobs and the weak demand for skilled workers characterize the demand side of the labour market.

On the supply side, the labour force is steadily increasing due to the growing participation of women in the labour market and in spite of the slowing population growth. In addition, the rise in the education level of the population does not match the low-skilled jobs created in the Tunisian economy. The total educated labour force, comprising those with secondary and vocational education as well as those with university degrees, has grown to over 53 per cent. Even though the policy aiming at boosting access to education has sometimes overlooked the quality of the education and training provided, the country has considerably increased its stock of human capital. These educated young Tunisian expect to find decent jobs and are not satisfied with the lack of social security coverage, the poor working conditions and the low-wage jobs generated by the Tunisian economy, in particular in the informal sector.

The poor labour market outcomes for youth conceal important disparities in terms of gender and geographic coverage. The unemployment rate is significantly higher for women, and in particular for female graduates, and in poor regions of the country. Female labour market participation rate stands at 27 per cent, compared to 70 per cent for men. Unemployment rate is ten times higher for graduates from Tataouine (51.7 per cent) than Monastir (5.9 per cent); the average unemployment rate of graduates in the South of Tunisia is 29.5 per cent, but much greater in Gafsa (47.4 per cent), Jendouba (40.1 per cent) and Sidibouazid (41 per cent)<sup>iii</sup>.

## Main features of youth migration

As a result of the deterioration of the youth labour market, the share of young Tunisians that have intentions to leave the country and live abroad has sharply increased since the mid-1990s. A three-fold increase in the desire to migrate, however, translated only in a 2.3 per cent increase in the overall number of young migrants<sup>iv</sup>. Potential migrants meet obstacles related to the costs of the emigration process and restrictive migration policies in destination countries.



Between May 2011 and May 2012, around 51,000 Tunisians emigrated abroad. Young men constitute the majority of migrants: Tunisians between 15 and 29 represent 61.6 per cent of all migrants, with 86.1 per cent of men and 13.9 per cent of women<sup>v</sup>. Although women still comprise a small percentage, the number of female migrants has increased in recent years compared to prior migration flows. This goes hand in hand with the fact that Tunisian women have higher education levels, better access to the job market, and get married later.



There are no migration surveys that target directly youth. Nonetheless, given the high proportion of young migrants in the overall migrating population, general results largely apply to youth. Motivations to migrate are strongly determined by gender. Employment is the main driver for both men and women, but at very different levels: 85.6 per cent of men and 38.4 per cent of women migrate in search of better employment perspectives. For 36.3 per cent of women, family reasons (reunification and marriage) trigger migration, while this is the case for only 3.8 per cent of men. Educational purposes apply to 16.9 per cent of women and only 5 per cent of men<sup>vi</sup>.

The destination country is chosen according to its accessibility (e.g. visas procedures) for 34 per cent of migrants, and to the presence of family members for 25 per cent. The language factor is mentioned only by 6 per cent of migrants<sup>vii</sup>. Europe is currently the favourite destination of Tunisians and receives 81 per cent of Tunisian migration flows. France is the top destination country, with 54 per cent of the total migrant population. Arabic countries come next with 12 per cent of the flows.

The new generation of Tunisian migrants shows higher education levels than the

### *Box 1. Addressing youth employment and migration in three regions of Tunisia*

The thematic window on Youth, Employment and Migration (YEM) of the Millennium Development Goal Achievement Fund (MDGF) is sponsored by the government of Spain and jointly implemented a group of UN agencies.

The YEM joint programme has implemented measures to address youth migration in three areas of Tunisia which were the most affected by the Libyan crisis and faced a massive return of Tunisians from Libya, in February 2011.

The programme targeted unemployed university graduates and unemployed unskilled youth. It managed to:

- a) enhance national and regional capacities to develop, implement, coordinate and monitor regional employment and migration policies and programmes, as well as improve the relation between Tunisian institutions and youth movements; and
- b) promote innovative entrepreneurship and job creation schemes, including a circular migration mechanism for the youth of the pilot regions, and providing support to start up micro projects and cooperatives in different sectors.

The Joint Programme also sought to establish new public-private partnerships to enhance regular labour migration schemes, thus exploring new methodologies for managing labour migration. Access to overseas job markets is one way to reduce pressures on the local labour market as well as to respond to some young people's wish to acquire skills abroad.

previous one, which was composed at 85 per cent of people with primary school education. More than half of migrants today have achieved secondary education or more, and among them 15 per cent have a university degree. Tunisians therefore tend to occupy

better job positions on the labour market of destination countries. In Europe, although 50 per cent are still unqualified workers, 30 per cent are in executive and liberal professions or students. Among qualified professionals, 27 per cent are engineers and 28 per cent are teachers. Migration towards Arabic countries consists mainly of technical cooperation organized in an institutional framework, and there is therefore no evidence of deskilling.

Irregular migration flows from Tunisia are important, but there is no reliable data to estimate the share of irregular migration in total migration. Some Tunisian officials have suggested the number of 76,000 illegal migrants stopped between 1998 and 2006.

According to the data collected in a study based on 100 migrants from Jebeniana (Sfax region), the typical profile of a Tunisian irregular migrant is a young and single man under 30, with low education level (not above secondary school) and unemployed. The migration decision is based on the hope to escape from poverty for 90 per cent of illegal migrants as well as from unemployment for 72 per cent of them. Family and social problems constitute the third decision factor for 54 per cent of irregular migrants.

## **Policies, programmes and institutional framework**

Given the importance of migration for Tunisia in terms of human flows, financial influx from remittances or diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries, and because migration issues are related to a wide range of fields such as employment, health or security, there are a number of government institutions that cover migration-related issues (Box 2).

For the past decade, migration policies in Tunisia have focused on three objectives. The first aims at reducing illegal migration, and Tunisia has adopted a security-based and repressive approach which allows compliance with European objectives in particular. The second goal is to improve the links with the Tunisian Diaspora and make better use of the skills acquired by returning migrants in favour of Tunisian development. Finally, some efforts were made to strengthen legal migration through bilateral agreements (with France, Italy, Spain, etc.).

However, this attempt at organizing legal migration in exchange of Tunisia's commitment to struggle against illegal migration, has not produced the

### *Box 2. Main institutions involved in the management of migration*

- The responsibility for the implementation of the legal migration policy lies with the Ministry of Employment which is supported in its task by the National Agency for Employment and Independent Work and the Tunisian Agency for Technical Cooperation, which look for job opportunities outside the country and provide pre-departure training.
- The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Office for Tunisians Abroad are the two leading institutions in charge of the links with the Tunisian Diaspora by promoting Tunisian culture abroad. The two agencies for investment's promotion (APII and APIA) and the Ministry of Investment and International Cooperation complete this mission by promoting investment in and economic cooperation with Tunisia.
- As regards the collect and analysis of data, an observatory for migration and an agency in charge of migration and development issues will be created in order to centralize information on migration (currently collected by the National Observatory for Skills and Employment and the National Institute for Statistics).
- The administrative and social management of migration is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which organizes pre-departure assistance and administrative follow-up of successful candidates, and by the Ministry of Social Affairs and its offices abroad, that establish social security agreements with targeted countries and provide assistance to Tunisians abroad.





expected results: so far the number of Tunisians migrants to be sent in these countries is lower than expected (3,000 instead of 9,000 in France), and illegal migration does not seem to decrease.

In spite of this institutional framework and set of objectives, Tunisia lacks a comprehensive migration policy which would be integrated into the employment and national development strategies. As a consequence, Tunisia does not conduct relevant institutional analyses and studies on the topic. Potential, actual, and returning young migrants, in spite of their share in the overall migration and their specific profile and needs, do not benefit from any targeted policy.

In order to fill this policy gap, the newly appointed government created, in 2011, a State Secretary for Immigration and Tunisians Residing Abroad. This new institution has a two-fold mission: enhance the institutional coordination between governmental structures in charge of migration, and build a comprehensive political strategy in order to integrate migration in development strategies of Tunisia.

<sup>i</sup> Institut National de la Statistique - Tunisie.

<sup>ii</sup> Institut National de la Statistique – Tunisie. *Enquêtes Nationales sur la Population et l'Emploi*, 2005 à 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> ILO. *Country report on Youth Employment and Migration - Tunisia* (forthcoming).

<sup>iv</sup> Fourati, 2008. *Consultation de la jeunesse et désir d'émigration chez les jeunes en Tunisie 1996-2005*.

<sup>v</sup> Institut National de la Statistique, *Enquête Nationale sur la Population et l'Emploi*, 2011-2012.

<sup>vi</sup> Based on data from the Institut National de la Statistique - Tunisie.

<sup>vii</sup> This and further data in this section refer to ILO. *Country Report on Youth and Migration- Tunisia* (forthcoming).



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