

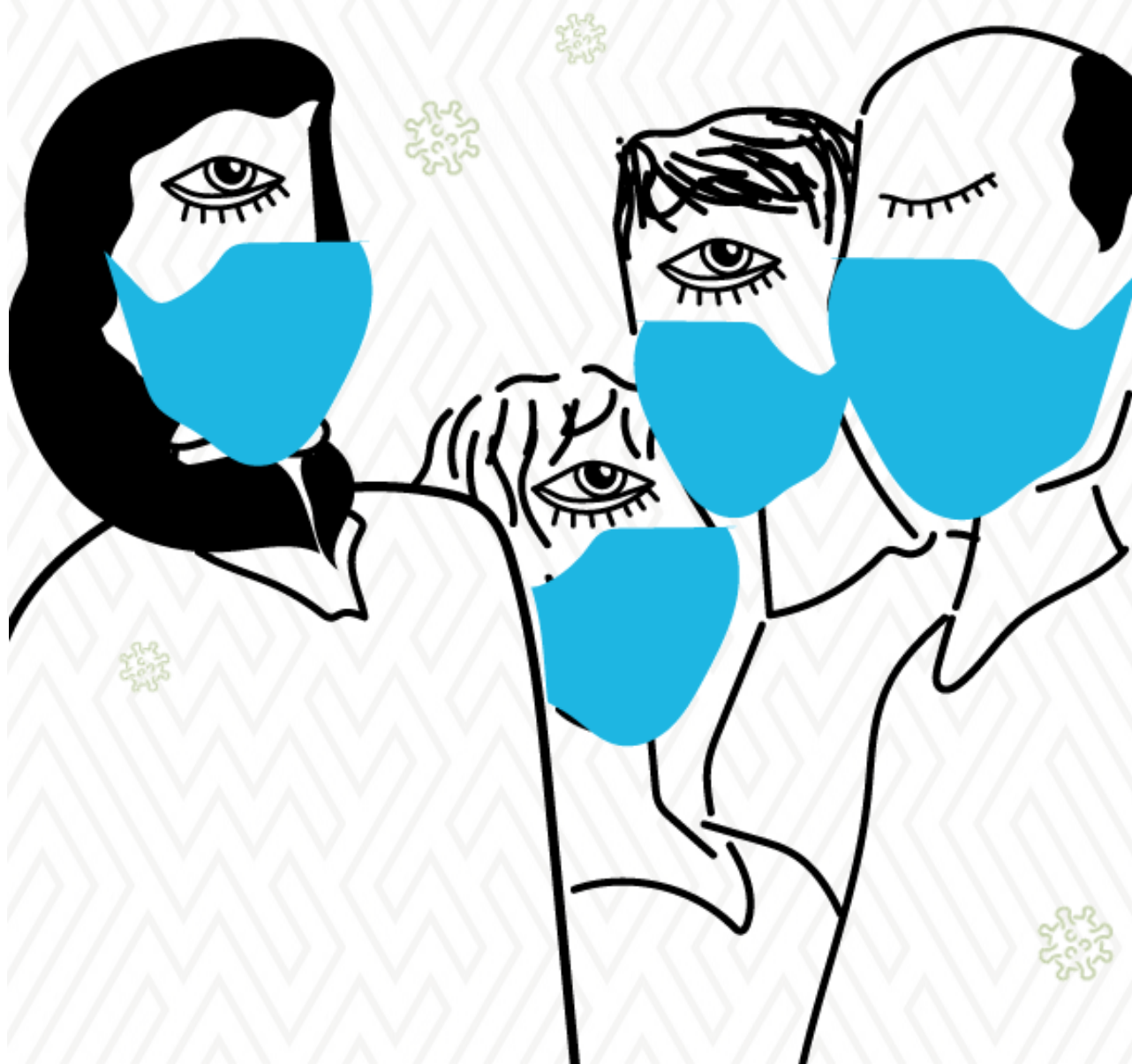


Tunisian Forum for Economic & Social Rights

The Covid-19 pandemic & the evolution of migration intentions among Tunisian households

A field study in seven governorates

by
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Table of Content

Introduction	4
First: Problematic and methodological considerations	5
1. Objectives and key questions	5
2. Methodological choices	5
2.1. Sample and geographical scope	5
2.2. Data collection techniques	6
3. Context	6
Second: the impact of Covid-19 on Tunisian households.....	7
1. Families and Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and managing epidemics	7
2. the economic deterioration of the family, widespread decline in household income and the expansion of vulnerable spheres.....	8
3. Solidarity within families: the family as a center of tension and individuals' last refuge	9
Third: the social inclusion crisis & the evolution of migration intentions in the context of the pandemic	10
1. The social inclusion crisis & the rise of push-factors	10
1.1. Individual satisfaction level	10
1.2. A weak involvement in public life	11
2. Familial migration legacy & the genesis of migration projects.....	11
2.1. Movements of individuals and families: past experiences	12
2.2. Families' migration networks & their impact on the migration project	12
3. The evolution of migration intentions during the pandemic	13
3.1. the decision to migrate or preparing for migration	13
3.2. Push factors – pull factors: a dialectic	14
3.3. Country of destination and migration project progressiveness	15
Conclusion.....	17
Bibliography.....	19

Introduction

Articles and reports on the Covid-19 pandemic, both in Tunisia and worldwide continue to flow, not to mention what would soon emerge under multiple creative forms documenting different battles, describing tragedies, or celebrating victories, and opening new horizons for analysis, evaluation and forecasts. Although elements of convergence between these different works seem to outnumber those of divergence as per the causes of the pandemic and its repercussions, it is, in our opinion, rather due to a curtailment of the pandemic to its, undeniably crucial, health, economic and financial dimensions; a curtailment coupled with inattentiveness to other dimensions specific to the impact of a pandemic of such a planetary scale on the lives of individuals and groups.

In view of this observation, we have chosen to dedicate our contribution to the work of the Tunisian Forum for Economic & Social Rights on the analysis of the impact of the pandemic not merely to plain repercussions but to the study of what this phenomenon might hide in terms of social transformations in general and what it would ensue as mutations in individual and collective social manifestations and practices in the medium and long terms. The Covid-19 pandemic and the evolution of migration intentions among Tunisian families is a field study conducted in seven governorates. Its starting point is a different interpretation of the conventional and the rejection of the limitation of the pandemic to a narrow set of dimensions. It also emanates from the belief that this pandemic offers opportunities for critical and constructive reflections and calls for rational introspections, but also an interest in what this implies in terms of behavioral changes at the individual and collective scale. It is likely that the pandemic is one of the spaces that embrace the decision to migrate, nurture it and support its execution, or an opportunity to escape from a reality that does not console social actors, or that of the availability of exceptional means to act on this reality, to criticize it, and to change it. Change might even affect the very being of these actors and their resources to reimagine their reality and to orient it according to their will. The pandemic could also be a reason for the expansion of manifestations such as selfishness, corporatism, bigotry, and regionalism, just as it could inspire unconventional solutions and nooks to review certain choices or to adjust them. It could also offer different means to different actors for more solidarity as well as broader field for the pursuit of collective salvation and the rise of certain values such as solidarity and altruism.

It is therefore not a question of exploring the direct repercussions of the pandemic – despite the importance of such an exercise in which a considerable part of the present study is grounded – but of connecting this layer of analysis to that of migration which cannot be explored within the limits of the obvious but should go beyond and into more depth. It is towards an investigative level that allows us to pay attention to migration as a phenomenon, as a behavior, and as an individual and / or collective project that we intend to orient our analysis. This also explains our focus on the family not only as a social institution or a structure for life and action but also as a field of individual and collective investment and an expression, among others, of the interaction between actors from negotiation to the construction of the common.

First: Problematic and methodological considerations

This study grew out of theoretical and field inquiries, to which we do not intend to give an answer, but rather increase the reflection on. As concerns the liberating civic identity of this study and human rights background, given the associative framework in which it was conducted, it also aims at providing the reader in general and social actors in particular, with different mechanisms of thought, in order to raise consciousness on migration-related issues, effectively introduce them and foresee their outcome¹.

In general, this study was founded on the following objectives and key questions:

1. Objectives and key questions

This research project seeks to:

- 1) Define how Tunisian families interacted with the pandemic in terms of forms of adaptation, solidarity, resistance, and resilience strategies
- 2) Define the extent of the impact of the pandemic on individuals within and outside the family, especially in terms of overall contentment
- 3) Study the impact of the pandemic migration intentions
- 4) Study the evolution of the migration project, family contribution to it and its feasibility

As per the questions that this study considers as a starting point, it is possible to summarize as follows:

- 1) How did the Tunisian family deal with the pandemic?
- 2) What are the levels of impact of the pandemic on Tunisian families?
- 3) What is the overall degree of contentment of Tunisians as per their reality during the pandemic?
- 4) Have the intentions of migration among Tunisian families changed in the context of the pandemic?
- 5) Is the family an enabling factor to the building of the migration project and its execution or is it a barrier?

2. Methodological choices

2.1. Sample and geographical scope

In view of the available capabilities and the objectives set in advance, this study was based on a representative sample of 1.400 families after delimitation of 7 projection zones of similar size (81.207 families with an average of 11.600 families per zone) covering different Tunisian regions. A group of interviewees was then selected according to the same geographical representativeness of their regions as per the overall sample and distributed

¹ This work is the result of a highly collaborative venture involving a multitude of partners and contributors: Imad Shukri, statistics expert, Muhammad bin Omar, IT expert, Amal Masoud, Amina Tarshon, Tasneem Hamdi, Ramzi Hakimi, Shahinaz Henchiri, Kawthar Boubacar, Muhammad Maamari and Maryam Kheila, field researchers; working under the direction of the supervisory team of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, especially the coordinators Romdhane Ben Amor and Cyrene Ghannouchi.

according to gender, age, place of residence (urban – rural), and origin in proportional accordance with the 2014 general population and housing census.

2.2. Data collection techniques

This study employed the questionnaire as a data collection technique, as 1406 questionnaires were distributed in 11 Tunisian delegations belonging to 7 governorates². The individual questionnaire used in this study consisted of 4 sections: 1) A first section including questions about the demographic, social, economic and cultural characteristics of the interviewee and their family, 2) A section pertaining to the overall degree of contentment of Tunisians as per their reality, at the local, regional and national levels 3) A section related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Tunisian families, especially on the socio-economic level 4) a fourth section concerned with migration and migration intentions, including a set of questions that aim to identify the way Tunisians perceive migration as a phenomenon and as a practice, as well as to track the emergence of migration projects and the challenges to their implementation.

In addition to the questionnaire, we conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of 17 Tunisian families from the same regions, who were chosen based on age, gender, individual and family experiences with migration.

3. Context

Fieldwork was initiated around the end of the first semester of the year 2021. The questionnaire was conducted between June 15 and July 15, while individual semi-structured interviews continued until July 25, 2021, we then decided to put an end to fieldwork and to rely on what was accomplished before July 25 to avoid biases that might be induced by impulsive conclusions and projected generalizations, and to guarantee the coherence of the context and its unity as much as possible.

In general, the features of the general context in which the fieldwork was conducted can be summarized as follows:

On a sanitary level, the first six months of 2021 witnessed the exacerbation of a health crisis; the first recorded cases of COVID-19 were officially identified in March 2020. Daily infections in Tunisia increased substantially starting from the end of June, daily cases have peaked at 4000, while 1230 cases were registered the previous month, about 700 cases at the end of February, and 1,750 cases in early January. As of the first six months, Tunisia's total coronavirus-related deaths stood at 10,000; 2,000 of which were reported in the month of June³. The government implemented a series of proactive measures to curb the domestic spread of coronavirus, including nationwide lockdown in January and May, overnight curfew. Governorates and towns also implemented local measures...etc.

² Hammam al-Anf in Ben Arous, Taklesa and Bouarqoub in Nabeul, Qal'at Sinan and Tajrouine in Kef, Ksour Saf in Mahdia, Feriana in Kasserine and Douz north, Tataouine north, and Ghamrassin, Tataouine And the Souk-Al-Ahad

³ See: Cyrine Ghannouchi, The COVID-19 Pandemic in Tunisia: Politics, Public Policies, and Protest Movements: A reading of the events of the first year of the pandemic (March 2020 – March 2021). Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), Tunisia 2021

On the political level, in early 2021, a political crisis in Tunisia was triggered. On 16 February, the Tunisian parliament approved a cabinet reshuffle proposed by the Prime Minister, but President Kaïs Saïed refused to invite the appointed ministers to take the constitutional oath. The first half of the year witnessed several political conflicts, Violence broke out in parliament, and disputes between the President and legislative branch have unfolded. To overcome the multifaceted crisis in which Tunisia is floundering, the president announced the state of exceptionality, dismissed the government and froze parliament on July 25.

On the social level, Tunisia entered 2021 burdened with social unrest across the country. Protests have gained momentum that year with about 7.000 cases of civil unrest in the first quarter of this year, almost twice as many as the first quarter of 2020⁴. Destabilizing social conflicts were caused by worsening economic conditions and the power struggle between the two leaders of the executive authority. Nonetheless, protests were met with an unprecedented level of repression from the police forces, and excessive use of force against protestors escalated to brutally beating, completely undressing and dragging a 15 year old boy in the middle of the street on June 10, 2021

Second: the impact of Covid-19 on Tunisian households

The pandemic is likely to have a large impact on economy, and the welfare of Tunisian households. Even before Covid-19, Tunisia's capacity for economic resilience had been drained by years of rising inflation, declining growth rate and per capita income. Though Tunisian households are likely to be hit the hardest by the pandemic, government performance remained weak.

1. Families and Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and managing epidemics

As of July 25, 2021, the end date of our field work, Tunisia's total case stood at 57,502, total deaths reached 18,968. Some think that official data communicated by the Ministry of Health may not present a systematic description of the magnitude of COVID-19-related deaths in Tunisia, because of limited screenings, use of alternative medicines and non-prescription treatments to prevent or cure Covid-19, and hiding or denying Covid-19 diagnosis out of fear of unwanted stigma, judgment and shame. Certainly, the novel coronavirus is worrisome for everyone. But for marginalized populations who live with poverty and other burdens, the outbreak could be especially brutal, as numerous reports noted. Same applies to the sample selected in this research study, as 44.3% of total households studied had at least one infected household member (623 out of a total of 1406). Some individuals might be more vulnerable to contracting the disease because their living conditions or jobs make them more susceptible to getting infected or not being able to seek health care. The elderly in the poorest households could be more susceptible to Covid-19 due to higher prevalence of intergenerational households. Obviously, official statistics suggest that one of the most vulnerable groups are the elderly and individuals with chronic diseases, however, field work

⁴ Tunisian Social Observatory, Bulletin of the first semester 2021, Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), 2021

shows that the Covid-19 outbreak affects all segments of the population and is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situation, mainly husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers, among which half of recorded infections were registered.

Tunisian households coped with the pandemic in different ways: panic, horror, caution and indifference. The related social impacts and coping strategies vary across social groups, as they are determined by socio-economic features and different conditions under which people face such a crisis, findings suggest. Fear and panic shaped most families' reactions to ongoing events (43%). According to interviewees, The COVID-19 related information reaching the people, including misinformation and disinformation, was equivocal in the early months of the pandemic, and failed to build the trust and transparency that is necessary for an inclusive response across constituencies.

Other families (30.3%) became numb to the significance of the pandemic and showed indifference amid the Covid-19 outbreak because of their socio-economic situation. Parents, as heads of families, even single young adult continued to be nonchalant about Covid-19, wanting to go back to normal.

2. the economic deterioration of the family, widespread decline in household income and the expansion of vulnerable spheres

30% of households interviewed suffer from financial instability, which poses a threat to families' well-being. Labor-dependent and poor income households working in low-end manual labor sectors with low incomes were more hit the hardest by the pandemic, especially during complete nationwide, or partial lockdown periods. Some households experienced income shocks, or income loss.

19.2% of low- and poor-income earners, making 15% less than the Guaranteed Minimum Wage (set between 400 and 800d) face financial distress, due to the rise in commodity prices and health spending, whether to combat the virus or prevent contagion.

Behind these figures lie unequal burdens carried by different population groups. In fact, Covid-19 impact eases higher up the social ladder; 25% of participants are people in the upper-middle and high-income sectors (senior employees, officers and private business owners) maintained their living standards, some received financial support and facilities, unlike socially disadvantaged groups.

The decline in household income has had a devastating impact on the economic security and well-being of the poorest households; many families are struggling with food insufficiency, lack of shelter and clothing. Statistics show that many families were struggling to pay rent during the coronavirus pandemic, water, electricity and gas bills. Some households were unable to meet basic food needs during nationwide lockdown periods, mainly in rural border regions like Tajerouine (28.3%) and Sinan Castle (15.7%) located in El-Kef governorate, as well as some capital cities like Hamam lif (21%) or the areas close to big cities, such as Takelsa in the governorate of Nabeul (18.7%).

During confinement, food insecurity rates among households in regions like southern Douz, Ghamrasin, or Tataouine were lowest, owing to strong social solidarity. In addition, a large number of research participants are engaged in undeclared activities and casual jobs,

mostly in the informal sector. The coronavirus has taken an especially steep toll on workers in these job fields. Approximately 9% of those surveyed are considering changing jobs because of reduced income, company layoffs, unfair dismissal, fear of coronavirus infection, etc.

3. Solidarity within families: the family as a center of tension and individuals' last refuge

The findings show the significant impact of the pandemic on social institutions, including the family, as a primary social institution. The institution of family is a basic unit in the society, and the multifaceted functions performed by it make it a much-needed institution in a society. It is one of the oldest social institutions on earth. However, the pandemic's effects on the family institution were both positive and negative. Manifestations of pandemic-induced economic hardships include general decline in economic activity, job loss and sharp declines in household incomes.

Participants were asked "How has your total household income changed since the start of the current crisis?" The response options were "It has gone down a lot" (38.58%), "It has gone down a little" (26.27%), "It has stayed about the same" (34.43%).

The pandemic has also fueled anger and stress, affecting core relationships (especially married couples⁵) and causing marital strife. 6.2% of married couples reported experiencing emotional and mental-health problems. COVID-19 and generalized lockdown had impacted family functioning, intergenerational communication. Family conflicts arise more easily as individuals were confined to their homes with their family members for an extended period of time.

On the other hand, families typically come together in times of crisis. Even though most Tunisian families have limited resources, 3/4 of respondents or one of their household member who contracted the infection, confirmed that unity, solidarity and mutual aid shaped families' relations. The pandemic enhanced the strengthening of the family unity and support was found within families and communities at large, but the government's efforts to mitigate some of the impacts of the pandemic were limited, and the emergency compensatory measures were insufficient. Government institutions failed to scale up social assistance on the local and national level. In fact, most people (70%) treated COVID-19 symptoms at home, about 91% of individuals infected with Covid-19 in Nabeul governorate adopted home-based treatment, while 49% of infected people in Tataouine governorate managed Covid-19 at home. As a matter of fact, families are a primary source of companionship and support, and individuals' safe haven. It still plays the most important role compared to the other institutions, especially with the absent presence of state, inefficacy, and poor performance.

⁵ The report of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights on violence in 2020 indicates that 25% of incidents of violence reported in Tunisia during the first months of 2020 were domestic. p. 14

Third: the social inclusion crisis & the evolution of migration intentions in the context of the pandemic

It shows that Covid-19 has generated a series of economic effects, but long-term societal impacts of the pandemic might cast a long shadow into the future.

Pandemics are epochal events. As such, they reshape society. Framing the pandemic from a sociological perspective may help anticipating the long-run social effects of different policies.

An assessment of households' situation and aspirations of their members in the context of the pandemic shows that it contributed in many ways to deepening the crisis of social inclusion and has clearly contributed to accelerating the process of transforming migration projects into family projects in which the efforts of multiple actors are invested.

1. The social inclusion crisis & the rise of push-factors

Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society, regardless of their differences and variant needs. This will determine levels of individual and collective contentment, citizens' involvement in public life, as well as inclusion and exclusion factors.

1.1. Individual satisfaction level

Contentment is the degree to which an individual perceives his/her aspirations are met, which has a direct impact on oneself, value, and reality represented, in formal and informal institutions, individuals, collective structures, and initiatives. These factors also affect individuals' positions, opinions, and aspirations. As a way to assess respondents' cognitive judgment of their satisfaction with their life as a whole, a survey was used involving a series of questions (20) according to Likert Scale. Results indicated the following:

1) Levels of satisfaction with family life:

75% of respondents are satisfied with family living conditions (51.2% are satisfied and 19.8% are very satisfied), as well as family bonds (56.7% and 22.3%). On the other hand, 40% were dissatisfied with the financial situation of their family (16.8% are not at all satisfied and 21 % are very dissatisfied)

2) Levels of satisfaction with the social environment:

57% of respondents are satisfied with community environment and living conditions at regional level, while 33% of them were dissatisfied and (10%) are mixed (about equally satisfied as dissatisfied). Region-based differences were detected, as we noted that the highest rates of dissatisfaction were mainly recorded in Tajerouin (58.5%), Feriana (55.4%) and Qalaat Sinan (52.8%)

3) Satisfaction with the country's overall situation:

47.8% of survey respondents are dissatisfied with the current situation in the country. Nearly two-thirds of them are mostly dissatisfied. The share of those who expressed negative views on their social situation reached 82%, while 84% expressed political discontent (dissatisfaction). This negative trend holds for the perceptions of economic conditions and health situation (92%).

1.2. A weak involvement in public life

Social inclusion is multidimensional; it encompasses life satisfaction, the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society, social integration and social cohesion.

A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, and creates a sense of belonging.

1) Political participation

Tunisians are disappointed by the trajectory of politics over the past years and have grown apathetic, as 6.5 % of respondents refused to answer questions about politics. It seems that the pandemic has scrambled Tunisians' priorities, as they are increasingly eschewing politics. Tunisia has actually witnessed a steady decline in political life participation; political party affiliation average was 0.6 %. This percentage does not appreciably differ according to age group, gender and geographical location. The overall proportion of political engagement does not exceed 2%⁶.

2) Community engagement

There is not so much difference between politics and community engagement in terms of percentage of participation, as research findings show that the overall rate does not top 1.8%, and it is completely inexistent in regions of Taklesa in the governorate of Nabeul, Tajrouine Qalaat Sinan in the governorate of Kef, Souk El Ahad, Southern Douz in Kebili governorate, and Ghamrassen in Tataouine. Community participation in Hammam-al-Anf in the governorate of Benarous reached 5.5%, due to its proximity to the capital and the dynamism of civil society in the region.

3) Volunteering during the pandemic

At the heart of the Covid-19 pandemic, volunteers have demonstrated an exceptional display of solidarity across the country, as volunteer engagement reached 12.6%, especially in coastal regions as it seems that their volunteering legacy⁷ helped them achieve higher rates than the rest of the regions. Feriana, Souk El Ahad, Southern Douz, Southern Tataouine and Ghamrassen fell to the lowest level on record, as opposed to Ksour El Saf, Hammam El Anf, Taklasa and Bouarqoub which reached highest levels.

2. Familial migration legacy & the genesis of migration projects

It is extremely difficult to quantify the social effects of the pandemic, as they will cast a long shadow into the future. Therefore, talking about the first indications as to the drivers of migration in a post-pandemic world does not aim to examine a reality that has not yet been shaped; it is rather an attempt to anticipate aspects of a future that is being formed. This is what we observed when tracing the spark of migration projects, which we will clarify by looking into individuals and families' migration heritage and the way it contributes to migration decision-making at the individual and family level.

⁶ the above-mentioned National Institute of Statistics survey shows that the percentage of Tunisians disengaged from politics and civil life (political party, professional syndicate, sports club and associations) in 2017 was 3% versus 6% in 2014. Previous reference, p.4

⁷ The 2014 World Bank report on youth shows that coastal regions have reached highest youth volunteering rates (72%), while interior regions have the lowest volunteering rates (13.2%), as well as southern regions (14.2%). World Bank and National Youth Observatory report. Breaking the barriers to Youth inclusion in Tunisia

2.1. Movements of individuals and families: past experiences

Tunisian society has witnessed successive waves of migration, and human mobility has been one of the important facets of society⁸ throughout history. Migration dynamics have changed due to internal and external factors. The pandemic has also had a profound impact on migration patterns, as well as past migration experiences which affect the formation and realization of migration intentions, through a series of individual and household factors.

1) Individual mobility per region

Inter and intra-regional mobility detects population mobility among regions and cities. In fact, past migration experiences shape future migration behavior, and affect the migration decision-making process. Survey respondents seem to have experienced that, as 28.6% of them moved to a delegation (mutamdiyah) other than their original delegation, while 38.4% moved to another governorate, and 12.7% have immigrated to another country.

2) Internal mobility, emigration, and the bases of gender distribution

There is growing evidence that women are as geographically mobile as men. However, international migration seems to be an exclusively male phenomenon, as the percentage of women who have past international migration experiences does not exceed 5.6%, versus approximately 1/4 of men. Internal mobility of families is often triggered by the search for greater job prospects and better public services (education, health, transportation, etc.). International male migration is mostly job-related, which is demonstrated by figures relating to drivers of past male migration experiences, as 77.9% of them cited job opportunities and 8.6% cited education completion. As for women, 43.9% of migration trends were family reunification, 29.3% for work, and 14.6% for education.

3) Internal mobility, emigration, and the bases of age distribution

28% of respondents have experienced internal and inter-regional mobility. Age distribution and median age of the domestic immigrant population shows that the proportion of young domestic migrants (18-29 years) is lower (26.2%) than the middle aged (32% among people aged between 40-49 years). The proportion of mobility between governorates is 38.7%, distributed as follows: 32.6%, for migrants aged 60 or over and 45.1% for the age group 30-39. Results suggest that young people's mobility is driven by family reasons, whereas it was an individual decision among the middle-aged group, for purposes that may include work or education.

2.2. Families' migration networks & their impact on the migration project

Despite expectable family changes, home is still a basic and essential building block of individuals' lives. In fact, the family bears the primary responsibility for the education and socialization of children and provides material and non-material care and support to its members, from children to older persons. In fact, families could afford to fully replace the functions governments perform and services they provide. In consideration of the foregoing, we are interested in a deeper understanding of family migration networks to

⁸ Hassan Boubakri and Swanie Potot, "Migration and revolution in Tunisia", Tunisian Journal of Social Sciences (RTSS), n°141, 2013, pp.59-78

puzzle out the context in which migration projects are established. The share of families with at least one migrant family member is over 90% in Ksour El-Saf and Qal'at Sinan and 80% in Hammam-al-Anf and Ghamrasin, which are significant migrant sending regions, unlike regions of Douz, Tataouine and Feriana, which, although famous for the importance of their border economy and their role in cross-border trade, do not consider migration a source of growth. Migration is not seen as an investment, but smugglers are seen as more trustworthy.

The investigation of the drivers of migration intentions confirms that the demographic and individual characteristics, having previous migration experiences and family network, are the likely drivers of migration intentions, which explains why regions of Ksour El-Saf, Qal'at Sinan, Hammam Al-Anf and Ghamrasin are in front rank of sending regions. Thus, the decision to migrate is seldom the product of individual decision-making; families are often involved in making decisions. Studies of networked migration have shown the significant role that both immediate family and wider networks of extended family, friends and acquaintances can play in facilitating subsequent moves. Moreover, the ubiquity of migration experiences can lower cultural and social barriers to migration as it becomes an 'expected' feature of life.

3. The evolution of migration intentions during the pandemic

The examination of the factors previously explicated has made it evident that migration is not a novel phenomenon for the Tunisian community. Instead, it potentially constitutes one of the most invested-in projects over generations. Yet, migration intentions are everlastingly a correlate of contexts, circumstances, and resources.

3.1. the decision to migrate or preparing for migration

The data provided by the field study have made it evident that migration intentions among the diverse societal strata have reached unprecedented proportions, with 25.3% of the interviewees overtly expressing their determination to leave the country, against 14.5% who remain undecided. Some of the structural factors leading to the increase of the migration intention index are articulated around the failure of the developmental approach adopted by governments following Tunisia's independence, and the inequitable distribution of wealth which translates into discrimination between different regions, strata, and generations. Other circumstantial factors are driven by the viral spread of the coronavirus, political tensions, the lurking shadow of financial bankruptcy, and the faltering performance of the state's institutions.

Undoubtedly, the diverse factors priorly cited are key determinants of the crescendo in desperation and insecurity among individuals, leading many a Tunisian to earnestly consider migrating. This phenomenon has gained momentum among women and men alike, despite the percentile disparity between the two genders. 31% of the male population seriously considers out-migrating, in comparison to females who represent 21%.

Seemingly, the intention to migrate is not age-restricted, but is rather a general consensus which many Tunisians opt for regardless of their age. However, around 47% of youth aged between 18 and 29 are considering permanent residency abroad, with an additional 35% for the 30-39 age group. This shows that the intention to migrate is no longer an individual

choice underpinned by circumstantial adversities but has rather become a sort of communal consensus adopted by multiple actors who do not necessarily agree as to the causes of the crisis, but see eye to eye regarding the absence of solutions.

The increase in migration desires index may seem deeply rooted to structural causes; however, comparing the indicators of the current study to a previous one reveals that the pandemic is directly linked to this increase. In the same vein, we refer to the percentage of young adults aged between 18 to 34 who constantly think of migrating, which did not exceed 35% according to "International Alert" two years prior, in comparison to an augmentation from 31% to 45% of those who opt to stay in their home countries⁹.

3.2. Push factors – pull factors: a dialectic

The field study conducted made show that cogitating migration and opting for leaving the country is neither random nor arbitrary, and that migrating is not fortuitous, but rather a calculated decision. Nonetheless, disregarding migration is no indicator that the option had never been appraised priorly, nor that it is overruled for future consideration. Overall, driving forces for migration can be summarized as:

1) **The Economic factor**

The economic factor is deemed of prior import in inciting individuals to leave the country, notably that an estimated 70% of individuals who intend to out-migrate consider the economic setting in the host country to outcompete that of their country of residence.

2) **The psychological factor**

It is intricately correlated with the individuals' negative perception of their home countries in favor of the countries of destination, as well as their optimistic view of the future. In point of fact, around two thirds of the interviewees believe to be capable of securing a better future outside of the Tunisian compass, whereas an estimated 57.8% are opting for migration in attempts to ameliorate the life quality of their future children. 52% admit to having entirely lost hope in the improvement of their country's situation.

3) **Freedoms**

It is not the last factor but it is of least importance, half of respondents intending to migrate stated that the situation of freedoms will be better, and 45% want to be more secure

4) **Family factor**

36.5% are choosing to escape familial pressure through migration.

5) **Personal factor**

Centered on concurrence among relatives, or the desire to follow in others' footsteps and reproduce the successful experiences in the family. These factors are quite important to about 30% of the interviewees.

There are multiple conclusive factors which yielded in the burgeoning of the migration project for a significant number of the interviewees, which may seem different and

⁹ Muhammad Ali Bin Zina, Olfa Lamlum and Maryam Abdel-Baqi (supervising): "Marginalized youth: representations of threats, politics and religion" in North Tataouine, North Kasserine and Douar Hicher. International Alert-Tunis, November 2020

Abdel-Sattar Al-Sahbani, Youth and Irregular Migration in Tunisia: A field study of social representations, practices, and expectations. Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. Tunis 2016

conclusive at most, some of which associated to the pandemic, whereas others are more deeply rooted. As for pull factors, they can be introduced according to the same order provided by respondents as follows:

1) **Family factor**

Respondents objecting to migration allocate great importance to this factor, being the sole providers for their families (30%), their parents (10%), caring for special needs family members, or if the family simply refuses to grant them permission to leave the country (14%).

2) **Economic factor**

This factor goes both ways in pushing individuals to dismiss the thought of migrating. It can be either negative, expressing individuals' lack of financial resources to afford travelling (16.6%), or positive, for those with a more stable and satisfactory financial situation (11.8%) and to whom migration is not a priority.

3) **The professional factor**

10.4% of respondents deem it unnecessary to seek a job abroad if they have already secured job positions in their home countries.

4) **Realism**

This factor is mostly concerned with individuals' qualifications and capacities, and whether they have any expertise in a given domain which can be employed abroad. They look at migration from a reasonable and objective point of view. For instance, some believe to be under-qualified as they lack language skills.

5) **The psychological factor**

This factor is considered to be of the least importance as it only concerns about 4% of respondents. It is centered around individuals' levels of satisfaction about their reality and optimism for the future

3.3. Country of destination and migration project progressiveness

The question of whether to leave the country or remain in it has grown to occupy a central position in the lives of Tunisians; especially that migration had become the sole solution sought out by individuals with higher aspirations and ambitions. Accordingly, what are the distinguishing features of this world they are seeking? What means would they employ to reach their objective?

1) **Country of destination**

The following list of host countries indicates that the migration phenomenon has kept its prominent features regardless of its rapidly varying indicators¹⁰. Our observations concerning the host countries can be summarized in three main points:

A/ France has kept the lead as the top destination country, followed by Italy. This is mainly due to the history shared between these countries, the geographical proximity, and the network of family ties which help facilitate the settlement process.

¹⁰ According to a study conducted by the FTDES on undocumented migration in 2016, destinations are: France 19%, Italy 13.2%, Germany 12.8%, Canada 11.7%, then the GCC and the USA. See Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, Youth and Irregular Migration in Tunisia: About social representations, practices and expectations (conducted by Abdul Sattar Al-Sahbani) - Tunisia 2016

B/ Canada was chosen as the third destination by an estimation of 13,5%, preceding Germany (12,7%). Scandinavian countries wedged more attention than the Gulf countries, leading us to induce the change of migration goals and migrants' identities, as migration no longer evolves solely around securing a job position, or acquiring manpower, but has become mostly concerned with competent professionals on the likes of engineers, doctors, health workers, college graduates; etc. Students from the aforementioned specialties are now taking part in these migration projects even before graduating and are conducting all the necessary trainings to enhance their chances of acceptance abroad (learning German for instance).

C/ Migrants are now seeking new destinations akin to Scandinavian countries which promote an image of success, attracting Tunisians, as is the case with Turkey which is medially promoting an image of a flourishing and advanced country.

2) Evolution of the migration project: tools and means

Migrants have reached varying levels in the completion of their projects, which fall mainly under 3 categories:

- The first category is concerned with irregular migration. Migrants in this category seem the most determined and are looking for whichever means to help them cross the Mediterranean Sea.
- The second category revolves around migrants who are still indecisive about their migration projects and are further confused by the farrago of mystery veiling their milieus amidst the pandemic.
- Respondents in the third category seem determined as they continue to prepare for their departure by collecting travel expenses, convincing their family, learning the language etc. despite the viral spread.

As for the steps migrants are willing to take, they can be summarized as the following:

- a) Contacting migration offices to get an employment contract. This mostly concerns migrants who are knowledgeable about international markets and the job opportunities provided by a number of migration agents in multiple countries.
- b) Illegal migration, which holds the second largest number of migrants, who seem to have made an irrevocable decision about leaving the country, and yet have extremely limited resources which can keep them from harm's way when crossing the sea, noting that the cost of this type of migration is constantly on the increase and can cost up to 5000 T.Ds. Some of these migrants take this risk to be an inevitable adventure in order to delineate their future in the way they deem fit. Others view irregular migration as a daily challenge against the authority and its boarder guarding forces.
- c) Buying business contracts through close friends or relatives, which is a means of investment in familial networks in a way that benefits both parties: depending on networks for a job opportunity with mutual trust in secret and with low risks to avoid questioning, noting that some migrants residing abroad have no professional occupation and depend solely on commissions from business contracts that they sell to their migrating connections.
- d) Visas, concerning essentially migrants who depend on their professional careers, their finances, or their connections with resident migrants in order to leave the country and regularize their situation once settled down in the host country. These are usually

students, workers, merchants, or even retired employees, who apply for visas to migrate to other countries that are less demanding when it comes to migration, or in isolated locations beyond the outreach of security control.

- e) Travelling to countries that do not require entry visas, which are usually east-European countries on the likes of Turkey which is usually a cross point to Western Europe. This equally concerns migrants awaiting the stability of Libya in order to move and settle down there.

Conclusion

Through this study, we have tried to elucidate the path through which the construction of the migration project occurs and determine the extent of the pandemic's impact on the evolution of the project under such exceptional circumstances. Due to the complex constitution of this project, we have thought it appropriate not to limit ourselves to the direct temporal, social, political, and health contexts within which the field study was conducted. Instead, we opted for a broader and more generalized approach, which enabled us to pay closer attention to the role of the household as a framework for the birthing of this project, developing it, and executing it.

Our research conducted in 7 different governorates from the four corners of the country with 1406 interviewees from different societal strata has finally ended. The following results can be presented:

- At the heart of this pandemic, families were resourceless, with an increased responsibility towards their family members due to the incapacity of the state's health institutions and other public institutions to fulfill their duties.

- The pandemic created a state of mass panic, initially caused by the families' limited financial resources and their unpreparedness for the crisis. Moreover, the government gave up on the most vulnerable spheres and mismanaged the health crisis, as it was unable to reduce the viral spread, which led to lack of trust in the government. The crisis has taken its toll on the families struggling to make ends meet, leading to their eventual normalization with the epidemic, taking into account that an estimated 43% of the families included in this study, had at least one member contracting the communicable disease.

- The pandemic only added fuel to the flames, as the families' income steeply declined, leading an estimated 9,3% of householders to switch jobs, considering that 30% of the families included in the survey have no regular income.

- Tunisian families were met with miscellaneous adversities during the pandemic, initially articulated around the lack of space, lack of financial resources, and tensions between actors. Nonetheless, the pandemic proved pivotal in strengthening the solidarity ties between members, noting that 70% of members who contracted the disease were treated at home.

- The pandemic revealed a crisis related to the social integration and participation of individuals in society, heralding feelings of frustration, despair, and obfuscating their views for the future, as well as increasing their aversion to both political and civil life, bearing in

mind the continuous political tensions throughout the entirety of the pandemic. All these factors combined culminated in an amplification of push factors.

-The pandemic paved the way for the nascency and consolidation of migration projects, considering the interconnectedness of Tunisian families with both internal and external geographical mobility. An estimated 28.6%, followed by a rise to 38.4% of interviewees have moved to different districts or governorates other than their original residencies.

- Families in regions with important migration outflows form an adequate setting for crystallizing migrations projects, which are buttressed by constant exchange with the migrants, and their continuous presence in the rest of the family members' lives. The Covid-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the migration project to gain more credibility, notably with the medical advancements and effectiveness in countering the pandemic, the availability of the necessary social and health protection mechanisms in host countries, which residents of the origin country were denied.

- Migration intentions have reached unprecedented proportions amid the Covid-19 pandemic, with an estimation of 25.3%. A proportion of 46.8% of Tunisians aged between 18-29 years old consider migrating permanently, in addition to 20% of the female population, equally opting for out-migration.

-the intention to migrate is closely correlated with the dialectic of push-and-pull factors. Evidently, the decision to make is the inevitable corollary of several factors which can either embolden one to migrate or encourage them to stay at their home country.

- The respondents' push factors fall concordantly under the fields of economy, psychology, freedoms, family, and individualism.

- The respondents' pull factors are related to family, economy, professionalism, realism, and psychology.

- For decades, France and Italy have kept the lead as the first destinations envisaged by Tunisians, whereas Germany and Canada are receiving more attention as migration destinations, along with Scandinavian countries and the United States of America, only with a lesser degree. The change in destination is coupled with a change in the migrants' specialties, projects, and goals.

- The fulfillment of the migration projects elected during the field work have reached varying stages of completion, as some await the decline of Covid-19 rates, and others continue to collect travel costs, convince their family members, look for unlawful migration routes or gain more expertise before departing.

- The means to fulfill this migration project differ according to the migrants' specialties and the nature of their project. As some turn to migration offices for legitimate business contracts, others rely on illegal migration, considering it to be the most rapid and efficient method. Other fractions can equally count on their wider networks of extended family and acquaintances to support them abroad or provide them with employment contracts once in the host country.

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