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Social Sciences Forum

GDN Global Development Network

Doing Research in TUNISIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

August 2025

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A funding and programmatic partnership between the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) with Expertise France (EF), within the framework of the EU-funded project Savoirs Eco, has enabled the Global Development Network (GDN) to include Tunisia in its flagship Doing Research (DR) global initiative. The views expressed in are not necessarily the views of MHESR, EF, or GDN.

The Global Development Network is a public international organization that supports high-quality, policy-oriented social science research in low- and middle-income countries to promote better lives.

The Applied Social Science Forum (ASSF) is a non-profit Tunisian non-governmental organization created in 2011. Through its role as an effective research institution, the ASSF aims to contribute to solving social problems, supporting reform initiatives, informing public policies, and influencing legislations and institutions.

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DOING RESEARCH ASSESSMENT IN TUNISIA – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tunisia has a vibrant but fragmented research ecosystem, where universities remain central but are disconnected from policy and civil society. The Doing Research Assessment (DRA) in Tunisia shines light on the situation, identifying structural barriers such as limited funding, weak coordination, and low research uptake.

The DRA in Tunisia also demonstrates that building stronger bridges between science and society requires not only funding and institutional reform, but also a new culture of engagement. Implementing these recommendations will help ensure that social science research becomes a driving force for inclusive and evidence-informed policy in Tunisia.

The Doing Research in Tunisia ran between March 2024 and January 2026 as a programmatic partnership between the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and Expertise France, within the project Savoirs Eco funded by the European Union. The Applied Social Sciences Forum (ASSF) put together the interdisciplinary research team, coordinated by Prof. Abdelwahab Benafaiedh, University of Tunis.

1. Context Analysis

Social science research in Tunisia is closely linked to the nation's wider political situation. Since the country's independence in 1956, a positive and collaborative relationship has developed between decision-making circles and academia. Over the past few decades research has become a lever for national progress.

This dynamic has helped research findings inform public policies, despite difficulties. And since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has been striving to evolve within a complex landscape marked by significant socio-economic challenges and strong democratic aspirations.

The DRA for Tunisia reveals several general features about the country's research ecosystem.

- Public universities are a major force: they remain the backbone of the Tunisian research and innovation system, employing the main pool of scientific talent. Meanwhile, private universities are yet to emerge as a key part of the research landscape, despite playing a growing role in undergraduate education.

- There is an invisible ecosystem beyond universities: plenty of research also happens outside of universities, but the visibility of this wider landscape remains comparatively low. The work conducted by think tanks and other research associations is not seen as being as legitimate as university research, despite making an important contribution to applied and policy-relevant topics.

- There are many young female researchers: of those who participated in the study, 68% of researchers were under the age of 46 and 64% were female. The 'feminization' of social sciences represents a major opportunity if matched by the presence of women in leadership and management positions in laboratories and research units.

Sociopolitical context

Since independence, Tunisian state discourse has prescribed scientific research as a tool for development. The social sciences, while marginal, were part of this effort. During the following decades, the oscillating relationship between social sciences and public policy often reflected the larger tension between the autonomy of academia and state power, with moments of collaboration followed by periods of mistrust.

Economic context

State investment in Tunisian universities and public research establishments is notable, despite an arduous budgetary context. In 2023, the budget for the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research budget was 2,153 million dinars – equivalent to 1.34% of Tunisia's GDP and 4% of the overall state budget. In 2009, the figure was 1,035 million dinars (6% of the state budget). Zooming in, public funding of scientific research was 8.5% of the Ministry's budget in 2023, down from 11% in 2009. Challenges include limited financial resources, inefficient allocation of existing funds, complex bureaucratic procedures, and weak inter-

ministerial coordination in scientific research.

International context

Employment opportunities abroad, particularly in Gulf countries and mostly for economists, have created a selective 'brain drain' on Tunisian research talent. The push to publish in English also tends to marginalize the international visibility of production in Arabic or French, particularly in history, sociology and anthropology.
Tunisian sociology, as well as much of the research done in think tanks and other associations, promotes and pursues work firmly rooted in local settings. Work is increasingly published in Arabic and the Tunisian dialect (especially in podcasts and on social media), and is often aimed at a general, non-technical audience. This means there is a need to balance effective public outreach with the risks of oversimplification.

2. Mapping social science research

In Tunisia most researchers are affiliated to research entities attached to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

However, the national research system is essentially made up of universities via their entities (like research laboratories and units); public research institutions (such as research centers and technological resource centers); as well as public health institutions, technical centers and technoparks, and competitiveness clusters.

Higher education institutions

Social and behavioral sciences account for the lion's share of enrolments in Tunisia's higher education institutions, with 91,828 students currently studying these subjects (nearly 45% of the student population). Among researchers, the share of social scientists is lower: full and associate professors in social sciences accounted for just 22% of the total in 2022-23.

In terms of geography, the majority of university social science research structures are concentrated in the "Greater Tunis" region – a group of towns and cities clustered around the country's capital. This area accounts for 20% of the country's population, but it is home to five out of thirteen public universities in the country (Tunis, Tunis El Manar, La Manouba, Carthage, and the University of Zitouna). Three quarters of all public research bodies are in the Greater Tunis region, as well as the majority of Tunisia's 85 private universities.

Government and public funding agencies

Non-university research also occupies a significant place in Tunisian social sciences. Several public institutions, usually placed under sectorial ministries, complement public universities and enjoy a fair degree of autonomy. National directories list around 40 distinct research centers, a dozen of which operate in the field of humanities and social sciences in the broad sense.

Civil society

Scientific organizations or think tanks occupy a relatively small position within the Tunisian research landscape. Research scope is also comparatively narrow, with three main areas dominating the sector: cultural and artistic activities (23.3% of associations); economic and social rights (12.2%); and human rights (11.8%).
At the same time, international organizations and institutions are increasingly present in Tunisia. For example, there are several research centers or institutes that are regional in scope yet remain attached ministries within their home countries.

The governance of social science research in Tunisia reveals a striking paradox. On one hand, the country has institutions such as the Center for Economic and Social Studies and Research (CERES), designed to play a central role in the field of social science research. On the other hand, the DRA in Tunisia project reveals that just 10.8% of Tunisian researchers correctly identify the existence of a national structure, while 28.3% outright deny that such a national body exists.

This widespread lack of awareness reflects a fragmented research ecosystem in which researchers often work in isolation, developing projects outside institutional frameworks and sometimes overlooking existing support mechanisms. Young talents, lacking clear prospects, look abroad for opportunities. Research, though rich and relevant to the Tunisian context, struggles to influence public policy or resonate within society.

Methodology and sampling

To conduct the DRA, the Tunisian research landscape was first segmented according to different categories (kind of institution, size, and location). A sampling plan was then used to define the number of researchers targeted by the survey in each subgroup.

There are approximately 5,807 social science researchers in Tunisia. This group was stratified according to some key categories, leading to a representative sample size of 400 researchers to be contacted.

In the field, a mailing and follow-up were carried out for all 5,807 researchers working in the various social science research entities. In the end, 489 researchers responded to the email survey, and responses were weighed based on the original stratification criteria. A dozen administrators and a further dozen policymakers were also reached by the study.

3. Findings

Demography

More women answered the survey than men. At 64%, this female majority among respondents supports the hypothesis of the 'feminization' of the social sciences in Tunisia.

Most respondents were also young. At 65%, the majority of respondents were concentrated in the 27-36 and 37-46 age groups. The youngest researchers (those aged 18-26) represent only a tiny fraction (2.3%) of the group and are almost absent from the research landscape.

In terms of the disciplinary composition, 41.3% were in management, 24% in economics, 6.3% in sociology, and 4.7% in law.

Research output and training

The pace of publication in the Tunisian social sciences has accelerated exponentially, from nine articles in 2000 to 517 in 2023. However, nearly a quarter of articles in the social sciences are not cited, and most lead authors (80%) have published only one article in total.

Researcher training in Tunisia is also a bit of a paradox. Upstream, the doctoral system produces between 1,500 and 2,000 PhDs per year. However, this massification carries risks: it tends to erode quality standards and devalue the degree, compromising scientific rigor and personalized support for doctoral students.

Downstream, challenges in the initial training phase have longer-run repercussions. New PhD graduates, though numerous, feel inadequately equipped for the future. Indeed, only 27.3% of respondents believe that there are attractive career opportunities in their field. Meanwhile, nearly 28.5% of researchers express the opposite sentiment, stating that they do not believe they have such opportunities.

Diffusion of research

A very large majority (85.8%) of respondents indicate that they have not participated in policy development. This figure suggests a notable lack of researcher involvement in the decision-making process, which could limit the influence of research on public policy.

Research communication

Analysis of responses regarding the number of documents produced per year, such as policy briefs or white papers, reveals clear trends among researchers. The majority (57.6%) of respondents indicate that they produce 1-2 documents per year.

Popularization of science

With 69.3% of researchers reporting that they never have contact with the media, it is clear that most of them remain isolated from public communication channels. This could reflect a perception that research is primarily intended for an academic audience, or perhaps a lack of training on the importance of disseminating scientific research with wider society.

Research uptake

The link between research and decision-making in Tunisia remains limited. As it stands, a low proportion of researchers (16.5%) have contributed directly to public policy development. However, indirect influence seems to be growing: half of researchers note that their work is cited in official reports – a trend that is particularly pronounced in economics and management.

4. Recommendations: for research in tune with society

To overcome these tensions and build a robust science-public policy nexus in Tunisia, concerted action is needed.

The following recommendations aim to redirect funding towards research with societal impact; professionalize the interface between social sciences and decision-making; and reform evaluation criteria to promote civic engagement and open science.

The recommendations are split into five distinct stakeholder groups.

For the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

1. **Prioritize programs dedicated to societal impact.** Allocate specific budgets to projects that have a strong societal impact and to make this 'societal' impact an evaluation criterion.

2. **Structure 'science-policy' mediation.** Set up interface units in each ministry. These units would be tasked with translating scientific results into operational recommendations.

3. **Break down barriers in the social sciences in the face of cross-cutting issues.** Break with the traditional disciplinary approach to steer the social sciences towards truly responsible research, rooted in solving complex societal challenges.

For researchers

1. **Training in scientific advocacy.** Develop mandatory training modules in communication and scientific outreach. This training should include presentation techniques, advocacy, and communication strategies tailored to different target audiences.

2. **Partnerships.** Collaborate with journalism schools and public media. These partnerships could offer researchers practical workshops and advice on how to make their work more accessible and relevant to decision-makers.

3. **Systematize operational deliverables.** Require an executive summary and a proposal sheet for all research reports. These summary documents would present the results in a clear and concise manner, facilitating their use by policymakers.

4. **Encourage hybrid careers.** Facilitate researchers' access to positions within the administration. This could include secondment or temporary assignment programs in ministries or public institutions.

For Universities

1. **Create public policy labs.** It is essential to set up dedicated physical spaces where decision-makers and researchers can co-design solutions to societal problems.

2. **Certify cross-disciplinary skills.** For social scientists, there are no longer just 'questions' to study, but complex problems to solve. Such investigations require a cross-disciplinary approach. In this context, acquiring hybrid skills is becoming essential, particularly at the postgraduate level. Certifying these skills is a key part of the puzzle.

3. **Developing applied open data.** The creation of a national portal bringing together research data that can be used by local authorities would be a major asset for Tunisian social science. This portal would facilitate access to relevant data for local decision-makers, enabling better evidence-based decision-making. Making this data accessible will also encourage collaboration between researchers and stakeholders in society, promoting innovative solutions tailored to local needs.

For think tanks and scientific organizations

1. **Professionalize strategic monitoring and scientific advocacy.** It is essential to position Tunisian think tanks as trusted intermediaries and to systematize the mapping of national and regional policy areas open to scientific expertise, while developing forward-looking monitoring to anticipate future advisory needs. This approach must be accompanied by a targeted advocacy plan aimed at public institutions and donors, highlighting the added value of scientific analysis in the development of development policies.

2. **Launch thematic public innovation 'sprints'.** Organize intensive, targeted workshops (or sprints), bringing together researchers, civil servants, and other interested parties. The aim

would be to produce operational guidance notes that can be used directly by decision-makers, while also creating an ecosystem of trust and information-exchange.

3. **Structure sustainable partnerships with the administration.** Develop cooperation agreements/frameworks across key ministries (Economy, Education, Health, etc.) to formalize the advisory role of think tanks. This could include systematic participation in expert committees attached to public programs; the joint development of policy monitoring and evaluation indicators; and facilitated access to public data.

4. **Strengthen strategic communication and scientific mediation capacities.** Train researchers in high-impact outreach and media communication, as well as in dialogue with non-academic stakeholders. The challenge is to translate research results into powerful messages that are tailored to the realities of decision-makers and the public.

5. **Diversify funding sources and guarantee intellectual independence.** This would involve exploring hybrid models combining public funding conditional on peer review; service contracts with international institutions; ethically supervised dedicated sponsorship; and a national fund dedicated to public scientific advice, supplemented by the state and technical partners.

6. **Incubate policy innovation through local demonstrators.** This would be achieved by experimenting with pilot projects in test regions or sectors, co-developing innovative solutions informed by research with local authorities.

For decision-makers

1. **Establish scientific quotas.** Reserve 10% of positions in senior advisory bodies for active researchers. This measure would ensure meaningful representation of scientific experts in the decision-making process, ensuring that public policies are informed by evidence.

2. **Make scientific impact assessments standard practice.** Major legislative proposals should undergo systematic peer review before being adopted. This would ensure that legislative decisions are based on rigorous and relevant research, strengthening the quality of public policy as a result.

3. **Create an annual barometer.** Develop a way to measure/monitor the effective use of research in public policy. A barometer would provide essential data on the integration of research into the decision-making process and identify areas for improvement.

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