



# PERCEPTIONS

Policy Brief

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## Beyond the Boats: Unpacking the Primary Drivers of Tunisian Migration

Insights and Recommendations for targeted policies

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### • Executive Summary

Tunisia is a country that has long grappled with emigration challenges. Over the years, many Tunisians have left the country in search of better economic opportunities and improved living conditions, often undertaking an irregular migration path. While irregular migration remains a challenge for Tunisia and Tunisian immigrants' hosting countries, it is important to understand and analyse the underlying economic, political, and social drivers that push or pull Tunisian citizens to leave their country, as well as their perceptions of Europe, and the challenges they encounter throughout their migration journey.

This policy brief aims to address key points that emerged from fieldwork conducted with experts in Tunisia, including CSO representatives, policymakers, and LEAs, on migration drivers and perceptions within the Tunisian context. The brief also provides recommendations to policymakers to help them develop targeted policies aimed at addressing the root causes of irregular migration.

## ● Introduction

Tunisia has a long history of migration, as a country of origin, transit, and destination. In recent decades, Tunisia has been primarily a country of emigration, with many Tunisians leaving their home country to seek better economic opportunities and a higher standard of living abroad.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest waves of Tunisian emigration occurred during the colonial period when many Tunisians migrated to France and other European countries to work in agriculture, mining, and other industries. After Tunisia gained independence in 1956, migration to Europe continued, with many Tunisians moving to France, Italy, and other countries in search of work and a better life<sup>2</sup>.

In the 1970s and 1980s, political repression and economic stagnation in Tunisia led to a new wave of emigration, with many young Tunisians leaving the country to escape unemployment and political persecution. This trend continued in the 1990s and early 2000s, with many Tunisians seeking asylum in Europe and other parts of the world.

In more recent years, and particularly following the fall of Ben Ali regime in 2011, economic factors have been the main driver of emigration from Tunisia. High unemployment rates, particularly among young people, and a lack of economic opportunities have led several Tunisians to seek work and better living conditions abroad. Countries like France, Germany, Italy, and Canada have been popular destinations for Tunisian migrants in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

With visa restrictions from European member states on Tunisian citizens, irregular emigration from Tunisia, which involves leaving the country without proper documentation or authorization, has become the main path that many Tunisian youngsters undertake to reach the coasts of Europe. Despite efforts by the Tunisian government to control irregular migration, many Tunisians continue to attempt the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of Tunisian migrants arriving irregularly in Europe increased sharply in 2020, with over 13,000 arrivals by sea between January and November. This represents a significant increase from previous years when the number of irregular arrivals from Tunisia was

### Key Issues:

- *Migration is not a new phenomenon in the Tunisian context.*
- *Tunisian citizens have been on the move for many decades.*
- *Economic factors drive recent emigration from Tunisia, especially after the revolution on January, 14th 2011.*
- *Visa restrictions fuel irregular emigration from Tunisia.*

<sup>1</sup> [Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Van Praag & Van Caudenberg (2020)

much lower. In 2021, Italian authorities recorded the arrival of 19,957 Tunisians who disembarked in Italy.<sup>3</sup>

While irregular emigration remains a challenge for Tunisia, it is important to understand and analyse the underlying drivers that push or pull Tunisian citizens to leave their country, as well as their perceptions of Europe, and the challenges they encounter throughout their migration journey.

This policy brief highlights some of these main points which emerged from the fieldwork<sup>4</sup> conducted with experts working in Tunisia (CSOs<sup>5</sup> representatives, policymakers, LEAs<sup>6</sup>) regarding migration drivers and perceptions in the Tunisian context, as well as related recommendations that can help policymakers develop targeted policies to address these root causes.

- *Despite the ongoing efforts of both Tunisian and European authorities to manage irregular migration, it remains a persistent challenge up to the present time.*

## • Key drivers of irregular migration from Tunisia

Drawing from previous research outlined in WP2 (See D2.3<sup>7</sup>), the way that migrants view their destination countries is closely tied to the reasons behind their decision to migrate. According to the aspirations-capabilities framework<sup>8</sup>, which defines human mobility as the ability to choose where to reside, people's desires for a better life (i.e., aspirations) can motivate their migration decision. In this regard, individuals who plan to migrate seek to address the factors that influence their decision to do so, and their perceptions of potential destination countries influence various aspects of their migration decision, including the route, destination, and path taken. Interviewed stakeholders reflected on several contextual factors that represent some of the main drivers behind irregular migration, which are categorised as follows:

### ○ Economic factors

Many stakeholders framed the economic factors as “standalone” push factors, that reflect both country-specific economic aspects as well as migrants’ socioeconomic backgrounds.

### Definition:

- *The aspiration-capabilities framework suggests that individuals have both aspirations and desires for their life, as well as capabilities to achieve those goals. The framework recognises that individuals may face constraints that limit their capabilities, such as poverty, discrimination, or social exclusion. It also acknowledges that aspirations can be influenced by social norms, cultural values, and*

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90246>

<sup>4</sup> Ben Brahim & Hendow (2021)

<sup>5</sup> Civil society Organizations

<sup>6</sup> Law Enforcement Authorities

<sup>7</sup> Ben Brahim & Rogoz (2020)

<sup>8</sup> De Haas (2021)



According to stakeholders in Tunisia, people in many countries outside Europe who are living in extreme poverty and have financial responsibilities may view migration as a means of alleviating poverty, finding better employment opportunities, and providing for their families.

The Tunisian economy is heavily reliant on a few key industries, such as tourism and agriculture, which can be subject to fluctuations and disruptions. This can make it difficult for individuals to find secure, well-paying jobs.

Although some migrants may have been employed prior to embarking on their journey, they may lack job security or economic stability. According to certain stakeholders, the lack of social benefits as a safety net in many developing countries, such as Tunisia, also affects how migrants perceive their future and the potential risks associated with losing their job.

## ○ Political factors

Tunisia has experienced significant political instability in recent years, following the revolution on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011, with several changes of government and frequent protests and demonstrations. This has created a climate of uncertainty and insecurity, which can be particularly difficult for those trying to start or maintain businesses.

Tunisia has high levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, which can make it difficult for individuals to find stable employment and support themselves and their families.

Corruption is a significant problem in Tunisia and can create barriers to economic growth and development. It can also limit access to services and opportunities for those who are not well-connected.

## ○ Historical factors

Stakeholders mentioned that the colonial past of many countries in the African continent, including Tunisia, plays a role in motivating which countries to migrate to (the presence of diaspora groups further supporting this), as well as the perception of the former colonial power as a source of aspiration.

Additionally, some immigrants may feel a sense of cultural and linguistic connection to the colonising country (for instance, the largest number of Tunisian migrants abroad reside in France<sup>9</sup>).

*environmental factors. By considering both aspirations and capabilities, the framework provides a more holistic and nuanced approach to understanding human development and mobility.*

## Key Findings:

*The main drivers behind irregular migration are:*

- *Economic factors (extreme poverty, inflation, lack of job opportunities)*
- *Political factors (political instability, high levels of unemployment, corruption)*
- *Historical factors (colonial past, linguistic connection)*
- *Individual factors (aspirations to improve one's life, family reunification).*

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.perceptions.eu/perceptions-country-report-tunisia/>

## ○ Individual factors

Aspirations to improve one's life by earning a decent income, accumulating wealth, purchasing a car, and building a house in the home country are commonly desired goals. While some individuals may successfully achieve these objectives, others may not. However, many young people in Tunisia view those who have migrated and found work and stability abroad as a point of comparison for their own aspirations of securing a stable and decent life.

Stakeholders placed a great emphasis on the importance of family reunification, maintaining strong social ties with communities and family members abroad, and the value of sustaining social connections within the Tunisian culture.

## ● Perceptions of Europe

In addition to the drivers of migration, stakeholders also reflected on what perceptions prospective migrants have of both their respective countries and of Europe, drawing from their knowledge of local contexts.

Perceptions are formed both in contrast to the conditions in the country of origin, as well as migrants' personal aspirations and capabilities to realise those aspirations. In fact, stakeholders agreed that perceptions were often presented in a comparative framework, where migrants perceived Europe as having more opportunities, better infrastructure, more safety and "respect of human rights" and citizens' dignity. This suggests that a significant number of migrants use their living conditions as a reference in their perceptions and subsequent decision to migrate.

- Stakeholders consider that prospective Tunisian migrants view Europe as "prosperous", offering economic opportunities, job security, social benefits, decent working conditions, and opportunities for socio-economic improvements.
- Migrants' decision to move to Europe is influenced by their perception of better opportunities such as improved living conditions, attractive salaries, and better social and health care compared to their home country. They view migration as a way to improve not only their own standard of living but also that of their family and community.
- The diaspora plays an important role in shaping perceptions of Europe and opportunities there for fellow nationals. As expressed

● *Perceptions are formed both in contrast to the conditions in the country of origin, as well as migrants' personal aspirations and capabilities to realise those aspirations.*

● *Tunisian prospective migrants view Europe as the land of opportunities and prosperity.*

● *Co-nationals living in Europe have a crucial role in promoting favourable views of life in Europe among their families and communities, whether through personal interactions or social media.*

by the interviewed stakeholders, perceptions of Europe for Tunisian prospective migrants are developed through co-nationals living in Europe, and the images and lifestyles they are able to lead when they return to their home countries, as well as what they share via social media.

## ○ Unrealistic expectations and associated risks

The stakeholders suggested that Tunisian migrants residing abroad generally share the positive aspects of their experiences in the host country with their families and communities back home, as a way to provide hope and inspiration to their loved ones. However, overshadowing the struggles and challenges they have encountered may pass on a rather biased, overly positive image of their life in Europe without fully acknowledging the risks and difficulties associated with the journey or the challenges they may have encountered upon arrival. Consequently, there may be a lack of awareness and understanding of the potential dangers and obstacles they may face in Europe, which generates unrealistic expectations and may ultimately result in disappointment and frustration. This could lead to feelings of disillusionment and even increased social and economic marginalisation for migrants who struggle to integrate or meet their expectations in Europe. Additionally, sharing only the positive aspects of their experiences can reinforce prospective migrants' decision to migrate as a way to improve their own standard of living as well, even if it comes at the cost of jeopardising their own safety by crossing the sea. As a result, this could increase the risk of exploitation by smugglers and traffickers, as migrants may overlook the potential challenges and risks associated with irregular migration.

For this reason, stakeholders argue that it is important to provide a balanced and realistic picture of life in Europe, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that prospective migrants may encounter, as well as the risks associated with irregular migration (whether it is during the journey itself, or after arriving to the host country). This can help to manage expectations, reduce vulnerabilities, and foster greater understanding and cooperation between migrants and host communities.

## ○ Information campaigns: Do they really address the root causes of irregular migration?

Information campaigns can provide accurate and comprehensive information to migrants about the potential opportunities, challenges, and risks associated with migrating to Europe, thereby reducing the potential

- *Tunisian migrants living abroad tend to share mainly positive aspects of their experiences in their host country with their families and communities as a means of inspiring and encouraging loved ones.*
- *However, this positive image may be biased and overlook the difficulties and risks associated with the migration journey or the challenges migrants may face upon arrival.*
- *It is crucial to offer a well-rounded and practical depiction of life in Europe that presents both the advantages and obstacles that aspiring migrants might face, along with the hazards linked to irregular migration.*
- *Information campaigns alone are insufficient to address irregular migration.*
- *A comprehensive approach is needed to address the underlying factors contributing to it.*
- *Such an approach should provide and promote safe and regular migration routes, as well as support the integration of migrants*



for unrealistic expectations and increasing awareness of the risks associated with irregular migration.

However, information campaigns should be carefully designed and targeted to ensure that they reach the intended audience and are effective in achieving their objectives. This may require collaboration with migrant communities and civil society organisations to ensure that the messages are culturally appropriate, accessible, and resonate with the target audience. Nonetheless, stakeholders expressed some doubt and scepticism regarding the efficacy of information campaigns in convincing migrants who have already decided to leave the country. Moreover, they have highlighted that a significant number of migrants still opt to migrate despite being cognizant of the associated hazards. This suggests that irregular migration is influenced by underlying factors that extend beyond mere perceptions of Europe or insufficient awareness regarding the perils of irregular migration.

Therefore, while information campaigns can be a valuable tool for addressing the risks associated with presenting only positive aspects of life in Europe for prospective migrants, they should be part of a broader, comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of irregular migration, promotes and provides increased opportunities for regular and safe migration pathways, and supports the social and economic integration of migrants into host communities. This may require coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, including education, employment, housing, and healthcare.

*into host communities, which may necessitate cooperation among different sectors, including education, employment, housing, and healthcare.*

## ● Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Adopt a more **human-centred approach to migration** that recognises the **positive contributions** of migrants and prioritises their rights and dignity, while working towards **addressing the root causes** of migration.

**Recommendation 2:** Build **stronger partnerships with countries of origin** and transit to **create safe and regular migration pathways** that protect the rights of migrants and reduce the **risks associated with irregular migration**.

- **Facilitating legal migration channels:**
  - streamlining and **simplifying visa application processes**

### Key recommendations:

1. *A human-centred approach to migration is crucial, which values the positive impact of migrants, respects their rights and dignity, and prioritises the underlying drivers of migration.*
2. *Creating alternatives to irregular migration through facilitating*

- increasing **scholarships and educational opportunities** available for Tunisian students in Europe
- promoting **international and bilateral agreements** that allow for **temporary or seasonal labour migration** (circular migration).
- **Ensuring that border policies and practices** (on both shores of the Mediterranean) are in line with **international human rights** and refugee law.

**Recommendation 3:** Promote policies that address **economic inequalities** in Tunisia and **foster youth employment**.

- **Encouraging entrepreneurship:** The Tunisian government can create policies that encourage and support entrepreneurship, such as providing **tax incentives**, **easing regulatory burdens**, and offering **training programs** to help individuals start and grow their businesses.
- **Investing in infrastructure:** Investment in infrastructure projects, such as transportation, energy, and communication networks, can **create jobs** in the construction and maintenance industries.
- **Promoting responsible foreign investment:** The Tunisian government can create policies that encourage responsible foreign investment, such as **offering tax breaks** or other incentives to businesses that invest in Tunisia. This can lead to the **creation of new jobs** and the **growth** of existing businesses.
- **Further developing the tourism sector:** Leveraging Tunisia's rich cultural heritage and natural landscapes by supporting policies that promote the development of the tourism industry, such as **investment in infrastructure and marketing campaigns**, can help create jobs in hotels, restaurants, and other related businesses.
- **Investing in education and skills training:** Policies that invest in education and skills training can help individuals develop the skills needed to compete in the job market. This can include providing vocational training programs, promoting STEM education, and supporting apprenticeship programs.

*legal migration channels*

3. *Promoting policies that address economic inequalities in Tunisia and foster youth employment.*



**Recommendation 4:** Addressing **food security** in Tunisia to improve public health, and enhance economic growth and social stability.

- **Invest in Agriculture:** Tunisia's agricultural sector has the potential to support food security by **increasing food production, reducing imports, and generating employment in rural areas**. Policies should prioritise investments in agriculture, including infrastructure, technology, and education.
- **Support Small-Scale Farmers:** Promote policies that support small-scale farmers, who play a critical role in Tunisia's food system, through targeted investments, technical assistance, and market linkages that could help to improve their livelihoods and increase food security.
- **Improve Access to Food:** Food insecurity in Tunisia is often related to **poor access to food**, rather than insufficient food production. Policies should focus on improving access to food, such as **expanding social safety nets, increasing access to credit and financial services, and improving transportation infrastructure**.
- **Promote Sustainable Agriculture:** encourage policies that promote sustainable agriculture practices, such as **organic farming, conservation agriculture, and agroforestry**, which could improve food security in Tunisia over the long term while also supporting environmental sustainability.

**Recommendation 5:** Create **more spaces for exchange between the host community and migrant community**. It is important to support and create common and inclusive socio-economic activities that **benefit both migrant and host communities**, rather than creating parallel services for vulnerable migrant populations. Collaboration and interaction between migrant and host communities should be encouraged in all aspects of society, including **education, healthcare, and social services**.

*4. Addressing food security in Tunisia to improve public health, and enhance economic growth and social stability*

*5. Increase opportunities for interaction and communication between the local community and the migrant population.*

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## ○ Websites

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## ○ Deliverables

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