

# CIVIL SOCIETY IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

## INTISSAR KHERIGI

Programmes Director, Jasmine Foundation

At a time when countries around the world are experiencing some form of transition – political, economic, technological, demographic, ecological – as well as increasing levels of distrust in political institutions, what is the role of civil society? How is civil society facing an increasingly challenging operating environment in a context of rapid change?

Civil society is broadly defined here to mean institutions, organisations and individuals undertaking collective action that is independent from the state and not designed to achieve private profit or public office. The civil society space includes highly structured organisations such as trade unions and professional associations through to mass social movements and online networks.

**Tunisia is a useful case study through which to explore the changing role of civil society in a world experiencing multiple transitions.**

Tunisia is a useful case study through which to explore the changing role of civil society in a world experiencing multiple transitions. While Tunisia is going through a complex democratic transition that sets it apart in many respects, its civil society faces similar challenges to those to the South and North of the Mediterranean when it comes to operating in a context of dwindling trust in public institutions, rise in populist discourses, high levels of inequality, an urban/rural divide, and disengagement from traditional forms of political and social activism.

### Civil society or civil societies?

**Tunisia and the wave of protests around the Arab region opened up new spaces for citizens to mobilise.**

The Tunisian revolution in 2010-11 and the ensuing wave of protests around the Arab region opened up the way for the proliferation of civil society by creating new spaces for citizens to mobilise. In Tunisia, the number of civil society organisations (CSOs) grew from 9,969 in 2011 to 22,844 in 2019; in Morocco from 44,711 in 2009 to 116,000 in 2014; and in Algeria from 81,000 in 2008 to more than 100,000 in 2019 (Desrues 2019, IFEDA Tunisia 2019, Bessadi 2019). This is alongside the emergence of social movements addressing a wide number of issues from natural resource management and regional development to women's rights and socio-economic exclusion.

**The Southern Mediterranean region has witnessed the increasing pluralisation of civil society.**

The Southern Mediterranean region has also witnessed the increasing pluralisation of civil society. While “old” civil society consisted mainly of established actors such as trade unions, employers' groups, professional associations and human rights associations, recent decades have seen the emergence of new civil society actors who choose to mobilise outside these structures.

An example are the unions of unemployed graduates in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Another is the growing community of “start-uppers” in Tunisia, a network of young tech entrepreneurs who successfully campaigned for new legislation to make it easier to launch start-ups. Both of these examples demonstrate how civil society structures are changing in response to changing relations between labour and capital and growing demands for socio-economic inclusion.

This pluralised civil society has also provided space for young people who do not see themselves reflected in older established CSOs, political parties or traditional union structures that tend to be dominated by an older generation. In Tunisia, a plethora of new organisations have

been established by young people on a range of political, economic and social issues. These range from civic education clubs in schools and local associations working on environmental protection to nation-wide social movements such as the 'Manich Msameh' campaign against the proposed bill on economic reconciliation.

While the emergence of a more pluralistic civil society is positive, we still need to ask, how representative and inclusive is civil society in the region? According to studies on the Arab region, participation in civil society structures tends to be lowest among youth who are less educated, unemployed or from rural areas (Mercy Corps, 2012). This means that the same groups who are under-represented in political institutions and public debate are also under-represented in organised civil society, resulting in double exclusion.

However, Tunisia's experience shows how democratisation can open space for the emergence of CSOs in marginalised regions suffering from the centralisation of economic and political power by authoritarian regimes. Since 2011, the number of CSOs has risen sharply in the South, Centre and North-West of Tunisia, where poverty rates are far higher than the capital. The number of new associations in Gafsa (in the Centre) doubled in 2011-12. In the Southern region of Medenine on the border with Libya, new associations created in 2011-12 represented 31.4% of CSOs in 2013 (Foundation for the Future, 2013). While there is still a big gap between urban and rural areas, marginalised regions are experiencing a civil society renaissance, with the emergence of networks of CSOs working together to make their voices heard at the national level, particularly on issues of regional development.

The socio-economic and urban/rural divides within civil society, alongside political and ideological ones, naturally reflect broader fault lines within society. International donors need to be sensitive to these dynamics and seek to engage with all categories of civil society actors equally. Civil society actors in Tunisia complain that international donors fail to engage adequately with regions beyond the capital, and that they demonstrate a bias towards secular civil society actors to the detriment of faith-based actors (Kausch, 2013). Such perceptions of discrimination or bias can deepen polarisation within civil society, undermining the capacity for coalition-building that could lead to more effective mobilisation around shared objectives (Debuysere, 2016).

### Changing forms of civic participation

To the North and South of the Mediterranean, there has been a notable decline in civic participation through membership in formal organisations. The idea of a life-long commitment to one organisation is being increasingly replaced by more 'free floating' forms of civic participation, which may be no less intensive or committed but tend to be shorter in duration (MitOst, 2016).

The rise of social media has also produced new forms of civic participation in the North and South. Cyberactivism uses online spaces for expression and mobilisation, creating a virtual public sphere that is particularly valuable where access to a physical one is limited. An example is the vibrant online discussions around Morocco's HIRAK and Boycott movements, which the Moroccan regime has tried to crack down on by arresting activists and journalists.

However, questions remain as to whether virtual spaces help to promote democratic debate and change or simply reinforce divisions by creating 'echo chambers' in which we consume information that confirms our existing opinions. More individualised forms of civic participation may leave traditional civil society actors struggling to reinvent themselves and adapt to these transformations. A good example of where this is happening is in the field of Social and Solidarity Economy, where the MAIF (teacher's mutual insurance fund) in France is supporting collaborative economy start-ups to develop new economic solutions that respond to social challenges.

**Young people do not see themselves reflected in older established CSOs, political parties or traditional union structures.**

**Tunisia's experience shows how democratisation can open space for the emergence of CSOs in marginalised regions.**

**International donors need to be sensitive to these dynamics and seek to engage with all categories of civil society actors equally.**

**New forms of civic participation may leave traditional civil society actors struggling to reinvent themselves and adapt to these transformations.**

## The changing role of civil society in Tunisia

**Tunisian civil society is also working with public officials to develop their skills and establish new democratic frameworks and practices.**

In an era of transformation, the roles and modes of functioning of civil society in Tunisia are changing. CSOs are still carrying out the traditional functions of advocacy and monitoring, seeking to hold governments and state institutions to account. In the context of a democratic transition that calls for strengthening new democratic institutions, civil society is also working with public officials to develop their skills and establish new democratic frameworks and practices. For example, Al Bawsala, a parliamentary watchdog, provides training for parliamentarians on a range of issues to support their legislative work. Jasmine Foundation, a CSO specialising in local governance, works to train and support newly elected municipal councillors to get to grips with their new powers, while also conducting citizen-led evaluations of municipal services to hold local government to account. Thus, Tunisian civil society is learning how to balance confrontation and collaboration in its relations with the state, supporting the building of a democratic culture while also holding public institutions to account.

**Continuing authoritarian practices in security institutions, particularly the police, are one of the biggest threats to Tunisia's democratic transition.**

However, there are certainly “no-go areas” in which it is proving hard for civil society to make a difference. One is security sector reform, a sensitive topic that CSOs engage in at their peril. Although continuing authoritarian practices in security institutions, particularly the police, are one of the biggest threats to Tunisia's democratic transition, few CSOs or international donors have come up with creative approaches to promote security sector reform. Judicial reform is also an area in which few CSOs have developed real influence, other than professional associations such as judges' and lawyers' unions.

There is a real need for citizens who are the ultimate owners of public services – the justice, policing, education, health and transport systems, etc. – to develop associations that represent their interests and push for deep-rooted reforms. Educational reform, for example, is an issue that concerns not only teachers, who are represented through their unions, but also students and parents. Yet much of the discussions around this sector are conducted as a bilateral dialogue between government and unions, without involving vast sectors of society that are affected by policy decisions.

**While civil society's power to influence policies is growing, there is still a need for greater specialisation and for organisations to build their capacity to analyse and evaluate policies.**

While civil society's power to influence policies is growing, there is still a need for greater specialisation and for organisations to build their capacity to analyse and evaluate policies. Tunisian civil society needs more support for policy research to enable it to hold government to account more closely by analysing the impact of public policies on different social groups and proposing policy alternatives. Without the existence of a civil society that is able to simplify complex policy debates for the public, identify where policies are failing, and involve the public, policy debate will remain dominated by government and a small circle of ‘experts’. The growth of think tanks in Tunisia is an encouraging phenomenon in this regard (Kherigi and Amiri, 2015), although the MENA region as a whole still contains only 6% of think tanks in the world (McGann, 2019).

## Structural challenges for civil society

While civil society is thriving in an era of increasing contestation of public policies, it faces significant challenges. As the Euromed survey shows, civil society in the EU and SEM share some common challenges, the most important being limited funding, political pressures, lack of independence, and administrative hurdles.

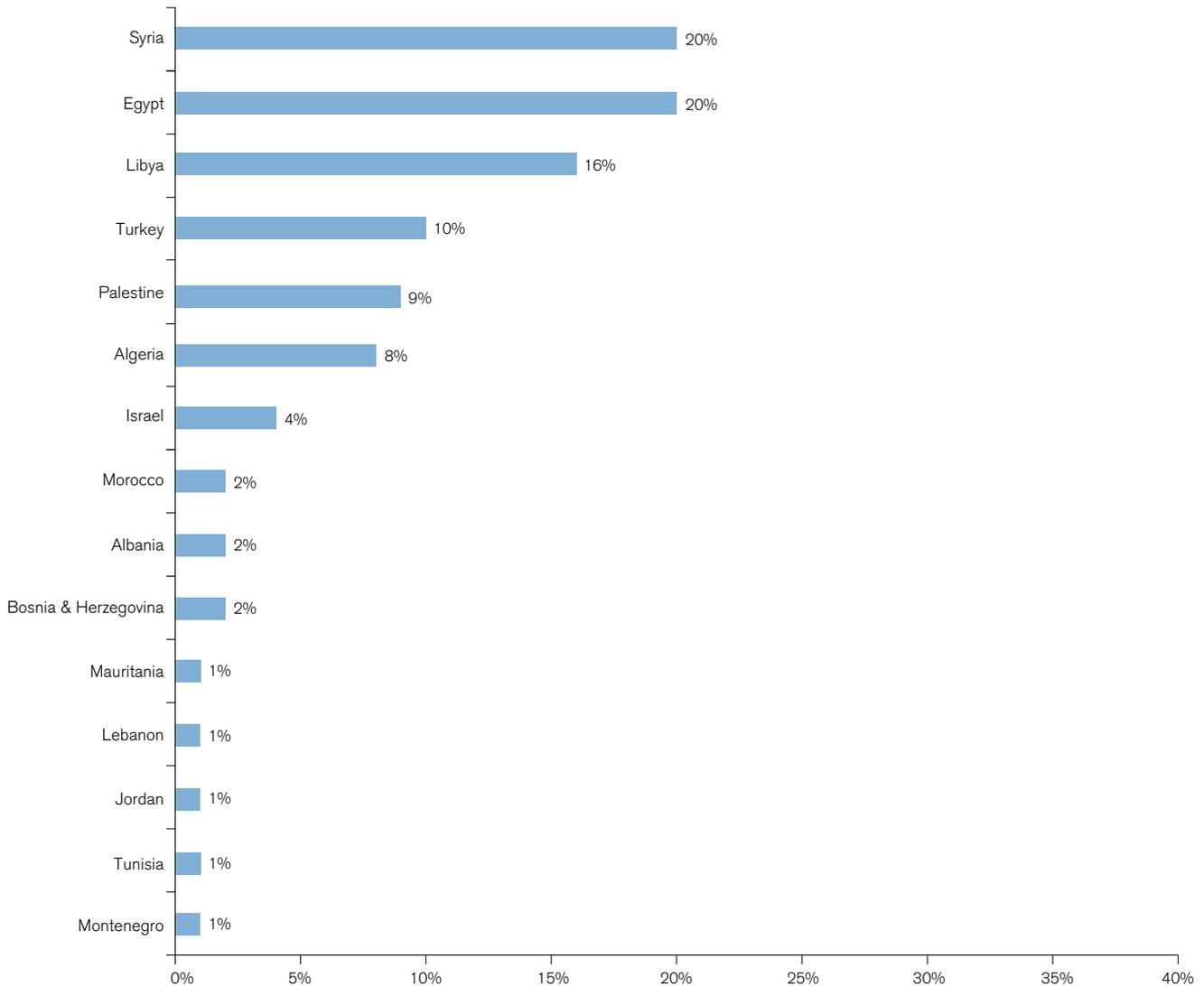
### Shrinking civic space

In Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, political pressures are cited as the main challenge for civil society. Civic space has shrunk as regimes react to the initial successes

of the Arab Spring by clamping down on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Notable examples are Syria, Egypt and Libya, which were cited in the survey as the three SEM countries in which civil societies face the biggest obstacles.

**Graph 1: In which Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries do civil societies face the biggest obstacles?**

(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 15)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Tunisia, Lebanon and Jordan are bright spots in this regard, rated among the SEM countries in which civil societies face the fewest obstacles. However, governments in the region have used an arsenal of restrictive laws and security apparatuses to crack down on civil society. In Egypt, new laws have made it practically impossible for CSOs to operate. In Jordan, Law 22/2009 allows the state to dissolve any CSO board or even the organisation itself on vague grounds, and subjects board members to security checks.

**Governments in the region have used an arsenal of restrictive laws and security apparatuses to crack down on civil society.**

**In EU countries there are growing concerns about the impact of counter-extremism policies on freedom of expression and association.**

The policing of online space has become a particular challenge. In Algeria, Internet access was disrupted during recent protests for political reforms. In Morocco, press and antiterrorism laws have been used to shut down news websites reporting on protest movements, while in Lebanon, individuals have been arrested and prosecuted for online posts criticising government officials (Amnesty International, 2018).

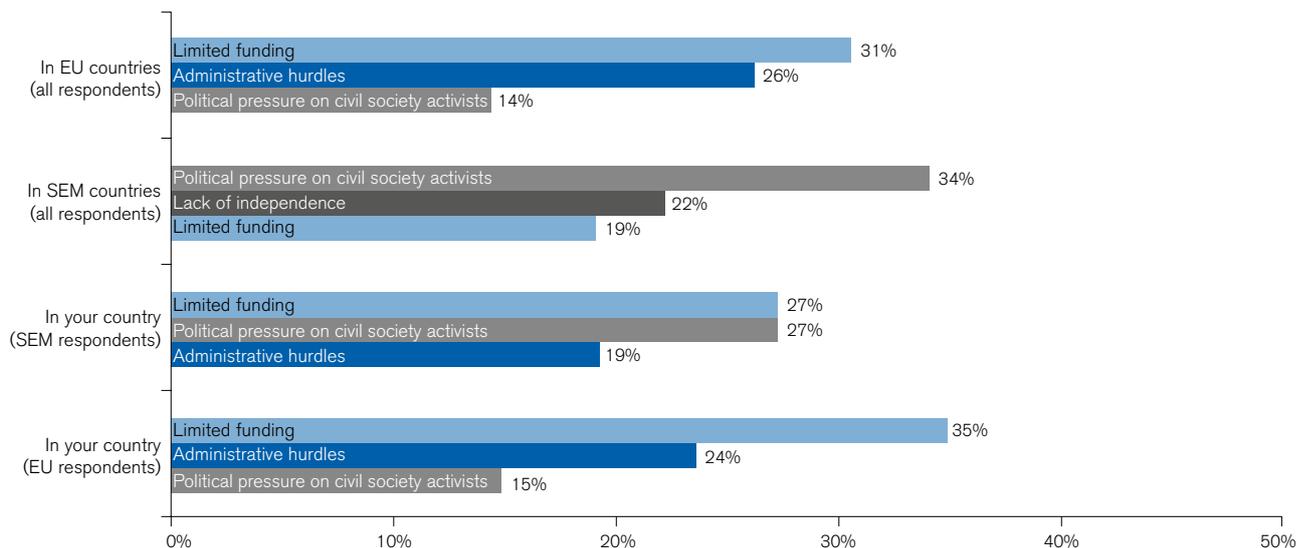
These developments are not limited to the Southern Mediterranean region but are part of a worldwide trend. According to the International Centre for Non-for-Profit Law, 64 new restrictive laws and regulations were adopted worldwide in 2015-16, leaving global civic space 'severely narrowed' (ICNL, 2016). While the EU has much more 'open' civic space, civil society is experiencing political pressures in Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary. Even in Western Europe, there are growing concerns about the impact of counter-extremism policies on freedom of expression and association, and the use of CVE funding by government to steer civil society activity.

### Financial sustainability

Another top preoccupation for civil society is financial survival. In the Northern Mediterranean, austerity policies have contributed to a decline in public civil society funding (CIVICUS, 2016). In the Southern Mediterranean, while the Arab Spring brought renewed interest and support in civil society among international donors, this has brought challenges of a different sort. Attitudes towards foreign funding remain ambivalent in many countries, which may not necessarily express a reservation to foreign funding *per se* but to its modalities and the way in which it impacts on the way CSOs carry out their work.

**Graph 2: What are the obstacles for establishing a successfully working civil society?**

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 5)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

In a recent study on counter violent extremism and its impact on CSOs in Tunisia, many activists said they felt that a reliance on international funding undermines civil society's independence and its capacity to set its own priorities. Many expressed concerns that current funding mechanisms promote a short-term project-based mode of work that does not allow civil society actors to focus on long-term deep-rooted change, leaving them stuck in a cycle of how to prove quantifiable results in a short space of time. Furthermore, this model pressurises them to be upwardly accountable to donors instead of downwardly accountable to the people they serve.

The financial sustainability challenge calls for new solutions and funding models. In countries with a more open civic space such as Tunisia and Lebanon, new funding models should be encouraged, whether via charitable foundations, corporate social responsibility programs or engagement with the diaspora. Crowdfunding has emerged as a promising source of civil society support in recent years. In Tunisia, a new law on crowdfunding is being discussed, which for the first time would provide a legal framework for crowdfunding platforms to be used inside Tunisia, with the potential to raise “10 million annually by 2020” (SwitchMed, 2015). Another potential source is social enterprise, which is developing in many parts of Europe. While it has existed for centuries in the Southern Mediterranean in the form of *‘awqaf’* (foundations), current legal frameworks remain restrictive in many countries.

### Organisational sustainability

For new CSOs in particular, another challenge is organisational sustainability. The new CSOs that emerged in Tunisia after 2011 have faced challenges in building their structures and teams while operating in an uncertain domestic and regional environment. They have faced a steep learning curve. In 2013, a study of CSOs in Tunisia found that an estimated 75% of staff had not received any training on project management or management of associations (Foundation for the Future, 2013).

However, six years on, the civil society field is becoming more professionalised and structured. It is also providing economic opportunities for young people, some of whom use it a steppingstone to employment in other sectors, while others are increasingly seeing it as a long-term career option. Around the MENA region, civil society is providing a learning environment that helps address the deficits of formal educational systems that are excessively focused on memorisation and failing to prepare young people for the job market.

### Conclusion

The ultimate challenge for civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean is to create lasting, structural change. The rise of social media and new forms of civic participation generate opportunities for more rapid dissemination of information, formation of networks, and virtual and physical mobilisation. At the same time, the rise of looser, more individualised forms of engagement raises questions over how to support sustained collective efforts for structural change, particularly in post-authoritarian contexts in which deep-rooted institutional reforms are needed.

A key challenge is to build bridges between traditional and new forms of civic engagement. Times of crisis and rapid change are an invitation to civil society to update its conceptual toolkit and modes of action. Civil society actors, whether organised structures or new social movements, must find ways to collaborate across divides for the common good and draw on their comparative advantages.

In the context of high public distrust in political institutions across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, civil society has a big responsibility. While civil society must maintain its independence, it has an important role in encouraging citizens to be more politically informed and active. In the Southern Mediterranean, where issues of social and economic inclusion are particularly prominent, civil society has a role in developing an informed public debate on how to create a new social contract that sets aside the old authoritarian bargain and builds new inclusive democratic societies based on respect for human rights, the rule of law and social justice.

**The financial sustainability challenge calls for new solutions and funding models.**

**In Tunisia, after six years, the civil society field is becoming more professionalised and structured.**

**The ultimate challenge for civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean is to create lasting, structural change.**

**A key challenge is to build bridges between traditional and new forms of civic engagement.**

**There is a desire for exchange between civil societies on both sides of the Mediterranean. Subnational cooperation presents new opportunities in the context of decentralisation reforms.**

The survey also reveals that there is a desire for exchange between civil societies on both sides of the Mediterranean. Decentralisation reforms in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan in particular, have energised local civil society and present new opportunities for subnational cooperation. In order to make the most of these opportunities, international partners need to get to grips with the changing civic space in the Southern Mediterranean and review the rigid and short-term nature of current partnership frameworks in order to enable civil society to focus on long-term sustainable results.

## Bibliography

- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL.** (2019). *Human Rights in Lebanon: Review of 2018*, 26 February 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE18/9907/2019/en/>
- BESSADI, N.** (2019). *Algerian activists demand a place at the table*. Qantara.de. Retrieved from <https://en.qantara.de/content/civil-society-and-democratic-transition-in-algeria-algerian-activists-demand-a-place-at-the>
- CENTRE D'INFORMATION, DE FORMATION, D'ÉTUDES ET DE DOCUMENTATION SUR LES ASSOCIATIONS, PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, REPUBLIC OF TUNISIA.** *Statistiques sur les associations*. 6 September 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/francais.pdf>
- CIVICUS, CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPE.** (2016). *Civic Space in Europe Survey*. Retrieved from [https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/civicspaceineuropesurveyreport\\_final251015.pdf](https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/civicspaceineuropesurveyreport_final251015.pdf)
- DEBUYSERE, LOES.** (2016). Tunisian Women at the Crossroads: Antagonism and Agonism between Secular and Islamist Women's Rights Movements in Tunisia. *Mediterranean Politics*, 21:2, pp. 226-245.
- DESRUÉS, THIERRY.** (2015): Los jóvenes en el mundo árabe de la "Primavera" democrática al "Invierno" yihadista?: participación y activismo político y social. *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos (REIM)* (n° 19) pp. 1-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15366/reim2015.19.001>
- FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE.** (2013). *Study on Civil Society Organizations in Tunisia*.
- INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW.** (2016). Survey of Trends Affecting Civic Space: 2015-16. *Global Trends in NGO Law*, 7 (4), pp. 1-21. Retrieved from <http://www.icnl.org/research/trends/trends7-4.pdf?pdf=trends7-4>
- KAUSCH, KRISTINA.** (2013). Foreign Funding in Post-revolution Tunisia. AFA, Fride and Hivos.
- KHERIGI, I. AND AMIRI, K.** Public Policy Making in Tunisia: The Contribution of Policy Research Institutes, *Middle East Law and Governance*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015, pp. 76-100.
- MCGANN, J. G.** (2019). *The 2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/think\\_tanks/](https://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/)
- MERCY CORPS.** (2012). *Civic Engagement of Youth in the Middle East*. Retrieved from [https://www.mercy-corps.org/sites/default/files/mena\\_youth\\_civic\\_engagement\\_study\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.mercy-corps.org/sites/default/files/mena_youth_civic_engagement_study_-_final.pdf)
- MITOST.** (2016). *Mapping New Forms of Civic Engagement in Europe*. Retrieved from <https://www.mitost.org/editions/clnewengagement/1/clnewengagement.pdf>
- SWITCHMED.** (2015). *Crowdfunding in Tunisia – Current status, challenges and benefits*. Retrieved from [https://www.switchmed.eu/en/country-hubs/tunisia/switchmed\\_le-crowdfunding-en-tunisie-etat-des-lieux-enjeux-et-avantages\\_en.pdf](https://www.switchmed.eu/en/country-hubs/tunisia/switchmed_le-crowdfunding-en-tunisie-etat-des-lieux-enjeux-et-avantages_en.pdf)