



### 3.1 Youth Inactivity; Young People Who Are Not in Education, Employment, or Training; and Unemployment—An Overview

**Youth inactivity is a massive problem in Tunisia.** Young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) comprise a substantial proportion of the potential youth labor force in Tunisia (see figure 3.1 and box 3.1). Young people without work who are no longer attending any school or training program spend on average more than three years searching before finding a job. Tunisia's youth are not only struggling economically; they are marginalized and economically excluded. Many

unemployed young women and men see little chance of ever finding work and starting their careers. Formal employment grows ever more distant for the long-term jobless without connections; few young Tunisians are able to find employment. This chapter presents the key challenges related to unemployment and inactivity. The chapter presents youth labor exclusion in decreasing order of exclusion and starts with youth inactivity (NEETs) and unemployment, while the subsequent chapter proceeds to highlight the underemployed and informally employed, and ends with youth who are formally employed.

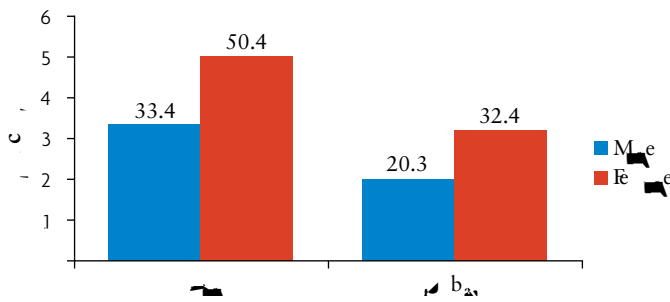
**One in three young men in rural Tunisia (33.4 percent) and**

young women in rural Tunisia (50.4 percent) is NEET; about one in three urban areas (32.4 percent) (see figure 3.2). The economic loss caused by this lack of productive activity is enormous. Equally important, however, is the social exclusion that millions of young Tunisians experience as they are forced to squander their skills, creativity, and potential.

**A large number of young Tunisians are leaving the countryside and often migrating to desolate urban areas**

“Generation Jobless” (Economist 2013). Youth in the interior face an especially unproductive abyss of years transitioning between their school and work lives. As focus groups revealed, youth have little faith in their skills or qualifications as they attempt to navigate a system they perceive to be rife with corruption. The interior region is

Figure 3.2. Youth NEET in Rural V00 11 78.(ers0.TjET Areas Tw (-)7.5079 Tm(NC)TjEMC 0 0 11 87.359 560.5079 T









rural areas are further confirmed by regression analysis of early school leaving (see annex 3, table A3.1).<sup>4</sup> The econometric results also highlight the key roles played by parental education and household wealth.

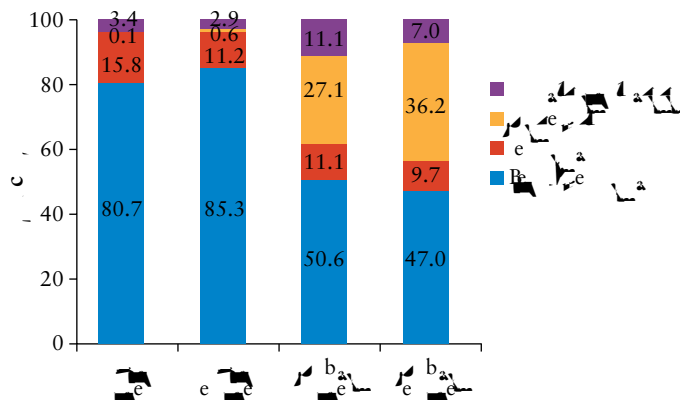
**Dropping out of school is a phenomenon that affects both young men and women.** More than half of Tunisia's children leave school without completing upper secondary education. About 140,000 students drop out of school annually, 80,000 of whom have not completed their basic education (Ben Romdhane 2010). Two-thirds of these dropouts obtain no further training and to varying degrees, generally find themselves in exploitative forms of casual labor. Often, they express a degree of bitterness or regret at having left school due to family circumstances over which they had no control—e.g., poverty, family instability, or the geographic area where they were raised. Youth dropouts may be vulnerable to being recruited by radical religious organizations or may have few viable options beyond clandestine emigration, as pointed out by one young school dropout.

*One of us stopped school so that another in the family could study. Like that our family can avoid getting into debt. Better that one of us makes the sacrifice, and I repeat—it is a sacrifice.* Male school dropout, Mahdia (CE)

*It is remarkable these days how the state just bypasses the young. That's why there is so much clandestine emigration.* Male school dropout, Mahdia (CE)

**Girls stay longer at school than boys and account for 62 percent of university students.** School and university attendance by girls has increased markedly since the 1960s and 1970s, and their academic performance has also overtaken that of boys. In urban Tunisia, more than one-third of all young women complete a university education (36.2 percent), a figure much higher than the proportion of young men (27.1 percent) (see figure 3.8).<sup>5</sup> However, women's higher tertiary enrollment reflects the absence of employment opportunities for young women, at least in part. Qualitative research revealed that many young women chose to prolong their studies to postpone facing the reality of unemployment.

**Figure 3.8. Highest Education among NEETs by Gender (Ages 25–29)**



Source: World Bank 2012d; 2012e.

Note: Figure reports the highest level of educational attainment among all young people aged 25–29 who have left education, including the employed and NEET.

*I would like to complete my studies. What am I going to do if I stay at home? Watch the TV? It's just further training, but it passes the time.* Female university student, Tunis

**Once economic reforms begin to create economic growth, firms will shift toward sectors of higher productivity with higher demands for skilled labor.** The need for unskilled manual labor will be replaced by demand for creative skills, innovative capacity, and technical specializations. Such skills typically require a secondary degree or vocational training. It is therefore a serious cause for concern that large portions of young Tunisians are unlikely to benefit from future productivity-driven economic growth. As a result, workers will continue to receive low wages and will face increased job insecurity and increased income inequality.

### *Educational Quality*

**Despite high enrolment rates, educational outcomes are poor across Tunisia.** The findings of the 2011 TIMSS survey indicate that 75 percent of eighth graders in Tunisia perform “low” and “below low” in mathematics, despite marginal improvements since 2003. Like most



other Middle East and North Africa countries, Tunisia performs much lower than similar middle-income countries in other regions (Mullis et al. 2012). Overall, secondary schools do not seem to provide students with the basic competences necessary to competitively perform in a globalized economy (World Bank 2012f, 2013c).

**Schools fail to impart life skills that would equip young people to transition to adulthood and active citizenship.** Practical skills training is largely lacking in schools, as is instruction and extracurricular activities that help to develop social, personal, and communication skills that would enable young people to reach their full potential and impart the values of work and citizenship. According to a study published by CNIPE in 2008, among the many factors related to the perceived declining standards was the abandonment of the examination at the end of the sixth year of primary school, known as the *concours*.<sup>6</sup> Successive curriculum reforms failed to improve basic learning skills by Tunisian students. As one student commented:

*Before, they weren't like us; they knew the value of things. They knew what the human sciences were. Now, there are lots of books, but nothing in the head. We study lots of complicated subjects, but they serve for nothing.* Student, Zaghouan (Northeast Tunisia)

**A perception exists that the quality of teachers also plays a role in the quality of education.** Qualitative research suggests that problems of poorly trained teachers start from the lowest level of the education system, where too many primary school teachers are recruited straight from college, without specialized teacher training. As one young respondent said:

*It's not a question of training or recruitment; there are teachers who simply cannot control their classes, who are simply not suited to the profession.* Female unemployed graduate, Madhia (interior Tunisia)

*Most teachers don't explain to their students what approach to take. They just give the equation and the result.* Male nurse, 28, Tunis (coastal Tunisia)

**Career counseling in secondary schools and at the university level is very limited, and students lack guidance on critical career decisions.** Many young people emphasize the absence of support and advice regarding the choice of courses and their career implications. In addition, the centralized and rigid university admission system that is in place limits the choice offered to prospective students and access to many popular courses.

*I requested Sociology and English and got Arabic. I hadn't filled in the ninth and tenth choices on the form, and the boy sitting next to me suggested putting Arabic. [...] I dropped the phone when I got the news.* Male entrepreneur, Tunis

**Much criticism is lodged against the successive reforms of the past few decades, which youth believe affected the education sector and that students view as ill-considered and arbitrary.** The reforms resulted in policies that teachers were ill prepared to incorporate in the classroom. One such contested policy was “Arabization,” which is using Arabic as the language of instruction at the primary and, in part, at the secondary and tertiary levels, including for science courses.<sup>7</sup> Initiated in the 1980s, the Arabization policy is considered by the youth to have been implemented in an unsuccessful and hurried manner. As one young woman described her experience:

*For three years I studied in secondary school, years 6 to 9, I studied mathematics, physics, and sciences in Arabic. But we had teachers trained in French. Personally, being among the best students, I think that the teacher was confused. He couldn't communicate, and I couldn't understand, because it was in Arabic, and I had the impression that it had been learned unwillingly. If the course was not in Arabic from the beginning, and the teacher has not taught in Arabic before, he is not going to be able to teach the knowledge. [...] It helps neither the student nor the teacher. It is exhausting.* Female graduate student, Sidi Bouzid (interior Tunisia)

**The final secondary assessment (baccalaureate) is another area of contention.** Some 25 percent of the final evaluation is based on evaluations derived from continuous

assessment, meaning that teachers can assign grades arbitrarily. This grading system is open to manipulation, favoritism, and score inflation. In addition, the timing and manner of how foreign languages are introduced into the curriculum are criticized by many students.

**While most industrialized countries are pursuing a strategy of life-long learning, in Tunisia, opportunities for additional training are very limited after leaving school.** On-the-job training for employed youth is very infrequent—only 1 in 10 young employed Tunisians have received professional training in the past year. According to the National Employment Observatory-International Labour Organisation 2013 School-to-Work Transition Survey (SWTS), only 10.4 percent of young employed Tunisians had taken part in professional training, mostly for further specialization (ILO 2014). Nearly half of these training activities were funded through public programs (40.8 percent). Access to these training activities is similar for young men and women.<sup>8</sup>

### *Counseling for Better School-to-Work Transition*

**Given the high levels of school dropouts from secondary education, counseling services need to be established, particularly for students in the grades most affected by early school leaving.** To be effective, these services should be professionally managed by private-sector providers in partnership with youth-led nongovernmental organizations to ensure proper outreach to teachers and parents and, most importantly, peer mentoring. Counseling could be incrementally introduced in secondary public schools across Tunisia to provide professional orientation, relevant information, life skills, and psycho-pedagogical support to facilitate the school-to-work transition, including the identification of apprenticeship opportunities. By developing inclusive information and orientation spaces and coaching Tunisian youth toward long-term work goals—especially disadvantaged youth at risk of dropping out of school—counseling services would also serve as a preventative measure to reduce early school leaving. This proposed reform is intended to complement necessary structural, long-term reforms across the education sector in Tunisia.

**A final key recommendation is to ensure that youth organizations have the opportunity to voice concerns**

**and offer solutions regarding educational issues.** The experience of other middle-income countries shows that,



istic of the interior. A female student at Zaghouan, only 15 km from Tunis, said of a factory established there:

*They never employ people from around here. They recruit people from Tunis or Sousse, because the bosses and the university professors are not from here. Everybody takes on the people that they know.*

