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TUNISIA: A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO ADDRESSING WASTE CRISIS IN SFAX

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Cover photo: Pile of garbage in Sfax, July 2022. © Maha Bouhlel-Abid

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Introduction

Waste management in Tunisia underscores the critical role of the central authorities in managing public services. The State exerts significant control over the waste sector, serving as a supervisory and regulatory authority over local governments, and is also responsible for providing funding, equipment, and real estate for the establishment of landfills, treatment, and valuation units. However, several events such as the 2014 waste crisis in Djerba which was triggered by the closure of the Guellala landfill, proved the State's reluctance to let go of its centralized approach to waste management and demonstrated its tendency to exclude civil society and make unilateral top-down decisions, such as the ones related to waste packaging, which is seen by many as having caused an environmental catastrophe.

The Sfax catastrophe has compelled the Tunisian State to adopt a more participatory approach to waste management, previously viewed as a cosmetic measure. The closure of the Ganna landfill in Agareb in September 2021, which continues until today, triggered the unusual involvement of central and regional authorities in finding effective solutions to the crisis and the central authorities' handling of waste management. One example of this approach is the Waste Crisis Follow-up Committee in Sfax, which involves a large number of actors in dialogues, and discussions. Before establishing the committee, several attempts were made to gather the opinions of civil society through dialogues, such as the reception of activists from the #ManishMasab (I'm Not a Landfill) campaign at the presidential palace to speak directly with the President of the Republic. Moreover, the Minister of Interior supervised several visits of delegations between the capital and Sfax, with various parties participating in an attempt to come up with a consensual solution that satisfies everyone. Since May 2021, the Minister also announced the launch of a comprehensive regional consultation in Sfax to address the waste crisis, involving all relevant parties. However, the results of this consultation have yet to be announced.

This paper is structured into six sections. The first details the methodology used by the Waste Crisis Follow-up Committee in Sfax. The second section provides an overview of the waste crisis in Sfax and its root causes. The third section identifies the committee's members, goals, and their perspectives on defining the crisis. The fourth section evaluates the effectiveness of using partnerships to manage crises. The fifth section discusses the escalation of conflicts and accusations between the central authority and civil society. Finally, the sixth section proposes policy recommendations to enhance the adoption of participatory approaches in managing crises, moving beyond containment.

Methodology

This study used participant observation as a methodology, where the researcher attended committee meetings on a semi-permanent basis as an observer. This approach provided a wealth of information on the technical, administrative, and legal aspects of waste management in Tunisia and allowed for an understanding of the committee members' perceptions of the participatory approach. One committee member described the participatory approach as proposing reasonable, implementable, and socially acceptable solutions to address the waste crisis in Sfax within a framework that involves all concerned parties and structures. By continuously discussing with committee members and observing the different parties to the conversation, the researcher was able to identify many shortcomings, difficulties, and challenges in reaching satisfactory solutions, including, for example, how to deal with some members of civil society when they refused to cooperate on a possible solution, how to address issues surrounding the transfer of powers from the central to the local level, defining the relationship between what is local and what is central, and ensuring that the chosen sites are suitable.

Sfax Waste Crisis

Since waste management has been a strategic priority of Tunisia's government since the 1990s, various regulations, laws, decrees, and orders have been introduced to improve waste management. Waste collection by municipalities is organized, with the waste being transported to transfer centers for sorting and treatment before directing it to controlled landfills for proper burial. Ten landfills were established in 2008 for an initial operating period of five years. However, 14 years on, the State continues to operate these landfills, despite their anticipated lifespan of 10 to 15 years, and residents of the areas surrounding these landfills view them as environmental disasters that threaten their health and harm their livelihoods.

The piles of garbage on Sfax's streets have become a familiar sight due to the long-standing waste crisis. The closure of the monitored Ganna landfill in the summer of 2020, due to pressure from environmental activists and citizens in nearby Agareb, led to a series of waste crises. However, the current one, which began in September 2021, is the longest and most violent. Ganna landfill, the second-largest controlled waste dump in Tunisia after Borj Chakir landfill in the capital, is

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a major point of inflow for all municipalities in the region, receiving around 600 tons of household waste and 20 tons of industrial waste daily. Since 2018, an environmental movement in Agareb, known as #ManishMasab, has focused on «environmental crimes» and «environmental terrorism» by the State against area residents. The movement highlights the dangers of the landfill to human health, citing the death of a girl from a mosquito bite originating at the landfill. Its movement has thus successfully mobilized public opinion through various forms of protest, including cartoons, vigils, demonstrations, sit-ins, flash mobs, and roadblocks, and has garnered attention from Tunisia's most important investigative program, *Les quatre vérités*. For photos of various forms of mobilization are available on #ManishMasab [Facebook](#) page.

Therefore, the #ManishMasab movement successfully achieved its objective of permanently closing the landfill by taking advantage of the temporary closure by the National Agency for Waste Management.¹ However, this action intensified the crisis, which continues to this day, resulting in a tense and confrontational atmosphere between the government and the public due to the authorities' inability to find mutually acceptable and effective solutions.

Diverse Perceptions of the Crisis

Towards the end of July 2022, the Sfax governor established an advisory committee to address the waste crisis in Sfax. The committee aimed to include a maximum number of parties to the crisis, including elected officials such as mayors of Sfax, regional representatives of government institutions such as the Ministry of the Environment, the National Agency for Waste Management, the National Agency for Ocean Protection, the Agency for the Protection and Development of the Coastal Strip, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Equipment, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of State Property, the Ministry of Finance, as well as businessmen, jurists, environmental activists, representatives of civil society in Sfax, researchers, and waste management experts. Notably, the absence of a major party in the committee, the activists of the #ManishMasab campaign, who are considered

¹ The activists of the #ManishMasab campaign seized on a media statement by the regional director of the National Agency for Waste Management in Sfax, which announced the closure of the landfill due to its inability to receive further waste.

to be part of the problem without offering solutions to help resolve the crisis, is noteworthy.

The committee's mandate was to propose a collaborative approach to managing the waste crisis in Sfax by drafting the preliminary statute of the Regional Agency for Environmental Services within a three-month deadline. This included identifying suitable sites for waste reception, such as dumps, treatment, and recovery stations, as well as evaluating waste management projects proposed by investors as a potential solution to the crisis.

The Waste Crisis Follow-up Committee in Sfax reached a consensus that the current landfill-based waste management policy has failed and that a new approach is needed. Sorting waste at the source, recycling, and valorization were identified as key focus areas. However, some members emphasized that societal acceptance of waste management equipment and the principles of justice, equality, and fairness between citizens and those living near the dumps are also critical factors. The committee also noted the absence of public strategies, forward-looking visions, and effective communication policies with the population as exacerbating the crisis. While some members saw the crisis as political, with individuals exploiting it for personal gain, others viewed it as a failure of the central authority to take responsibility and address social rejection. The governor claimed that some people were using the crisis for political purposes, especially in light of the elections on 17 December 2022, while others saw it as an illustration of the central authority's weakness, arguing that the State must take responsibility and address the issue of social rejection.

Examining the Benefits and Drawbacks

The advisory committee tasked with addressing the waste crisis in Sfax adopted a participatory approach to finding solutions that would satisfy all parties involved. However, the urgency of the crisis presented a challenge for the committee, as it had to work under immense pressure, with only three months (from August to October) to complete its task and achieve its objectives. Additionally, both the central authority and civil society in Sfax and Agareb were pushing for a quick resolution to the crisis, adding to the committee's burden. Despite these difficulties, the committee worked to develop practical and technically sound solutions, such as establishing sites for waste reception or setting up processing and valorization units.

On the other hand, the committee's aspirations and hopes

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were met with a complex reality in which various parties overlapped under strict central administrative supervision and control, making it difficult to find solutions. The committee's goals, such as establishing a regional agency for environmental services, identifying waste disposal sites, and attracting private investors, required a legal framework that involved a complex process, which takes a long time and is incompatible with the urgent situation the city is facing. The committee's desire to decentralize waste management and promote free management was hindered by the local authority's lack of necessary capabilities and the absence of laws that define self-authority and joint powers, and the relationship between local and central authorities. This required a lengthy process and new types of agreements, which were not suitable as short-term solutions. Therefore, some parties expressed their concerns about separating from the central authority and emphasized the importance of regional options that are still part of the national strategy for waste management to maintain the cohesion of the State. This is to ensure that waste management does not fall into the hands of separate agencies that operate independently.

Although the committee's proposed solutions require a significant amount of time, its work over the three months of its mandate yielded valuable results on both legal and technical levels, as well as in identifying potential waste management sites. On the legal front, the committee approved the Environmental Services and Sustainable Development Corporation's statute, promoting solidarity between municipalities in Sfax, as well as proposals for reforming the legal system for waste disposal, incentives, and concessions for waste treatment areas. On the technical level, the committee solicited project proposals from investors interested in waste treatment and management, receiving at least 12 proposals, as reported by one of its members. The committee also identified several sites for temporary waste collection and valorization, although they have yet to be announced due to concerns about a popular rejection of spreading the environmental burden across the city. Despite the lengthy process required for these solutions, the committee's work serves as a useful precedent for participatory action, even if its scope was limited to mitigating popular discontent.

It is worth noting that the detailed report on the committee's activities and key outcomes is still being finalized. Nevertheless, these outcomes have been tracked through the committee's press releases and statements made to the media, particularly by civil society activist and former city deputy, Shafiq al-Ayadi.²

Despite the committee's efforts, the waste crisis in Sfax has

resurfaced in the media as the community's rejection of the designated temporary landfill has led to garbage trucks being blocked and waste piles accumulating throughout the city once again. The situation has been exacerbated by fires at the port entrance, which have further deteriorated the environmental crisis, with smoke covering the sky of Sfax. There have been reports on social media of people fainting and suffocating in the city center, leading some schools in the area to suspend classes.

The Dynamics of Conflict Between the Central Authority and Civil Society

Despite the actions and efforts that have been taken, the conflict between civil society and the central authority regarding waste management persists. The public and civil society strongly oppose living near waste-related facilities, while the state views any criticism or opposition as a form of political subversion. Consequently, the atmosphere remains tense, with both sides exchanging blame for the issue.

The current waste crisis in Sfax reflects a failure of both the central authorities and civil society to effectively and sustainably manage waste. While the central authorities have implemented programs to reduce waste volume and promote recycling and valorization, these efforts have not been sufficient to address the crisis. Similarly, civil society has been unable to fully engage in raising community awareness about the importance of selective waste sorting at the source. An environmental activist in Sfax stated that «we no longer believe in awareness campaigns promoting waste sorting, as the initial enthusiasm quickly fades away.»

However, as the waste crisis in Sfax continued to worsen with thousands of tons of waste piling up and waste fires spreading, the mutual accusations between the central authority and civil society intensified. Environmental activist Zied Mallouli³ claimed that «the central authority has abandoned the committee and the local authority.» This sense of abandonment was echoed in the media, with public opinion agreeing that the central authority had left Sfax's local authority to deal with the crisis alone. The absence of

³ Zied Mallouli is an independent environmental activist who launched several online campaigns, most important among them #Seeb_eltrotoire (leave the pavement), #Yazi_tokhnokna (stop choking us), and #Sfax_tataharrak (Sfax mobilizes).

² Chafik Ayadi, a former Sfax city deputy, civil society activist, and a permanent member of the advisory committee to address the waste crisis in Sfax.

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the Minister of Environment and the Prime Minister from the scene, and their refusal to make any statements regarding the crisis, further compounded this perception. It was not until two weeks after the situation had deteriorated that the President finally made a public statement calling for immediate solutions from the Minister of Environment. He emphasized the political nature of the crisis, considering it a conspiracy by parties seeking to «bring down the State» with the expectation that «their place will be in the dustbin of history like the garbage they accumulate.»

The committee formed to address the waste crisis found itself caught between the opposing views of local civil society and the central authority. They attempted to find a solution that upheld the law while sharing the burden and securing financial and procedural support from the central authority. However, tensions arose within the committee when some members contradicted statements made by the governor regarding the relationship with the central authority.

Others accused the State of using the participatory approach to delay progress without any real achievements, with responsibility dispersed among various parties, allowing the central authority to evade its duties. Due to the tense political climate in Tunisia, the committee now operates confidentially and avoids public statements or any making announcements on its progress or future steps. This silence has only deepened the feeling among the people of Sfax that the central authority has abandoned them.

Following the outbreak of the landfill fire near Sfax's port and its continuation for five days, civil society organizations and the Tunisian General Labor Union called for mobilization and protests, along with statements demanding action. This incident intensified the exchange of accusations, with the Civil Protection announcing that it was arson and calling for the Public Prosecution Office to investigate its circumstances. Civil society then launched a new cycle of mobilization, using hashtags such as #Sfax_tataharrak (Sfax mobilizes), #Yazi (enough), #Yazi_haz_zabla (remove the waste), and #Yazi_tokhnokna (stop choking us). Environmental activists in Sfax also used the hashtag #Stop_choking_us in their battle against the Sayyab chemical industries factory, which has been closed since 2019.

require a gradual approach to gain societal acceptance of the proposed solutions. The pressure of time constraints poses a significant obstacle to comprehensive reform. Therefore, the use of participatory approaches during crises loses credibility and becomes a precedent that can only be relied upon when similar crises arise. Hence, participatory approaches must not be selective or temporary but should be established as a philosophy of governance and a different approach to the relationship between the central authority and citizens. Only then can such an approach contribute to resolving crises as a foundation for the political system.

Lessons Learned

While a participatory approach can be effective in addressing issues, it is not always suitable during times of crisis. The urgency of the situation does not align with the time-consuming nature of multiple dialogues and sessions. Furthermore, the government's tendency to only adopt a participatory approach during crises diminishes its effectiveness and appeal to the public, who demand quick and decisive solutions. Issues as sensitive as waste management

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The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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About the project

The project "Knowledge as a Public Good" examines the relationship between knowledge production, academia, scholarship, and public policy with a local focus and addresses the tension between international and local knowledge. The project includes workshops that aim to promote evidence-based research by providing technical skills and a translation platform for up-and-coming scholars who write in Arabic.