

## **Inhibitors of Non-for Profit Organisations' activities and survival in a crisis context**

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### **Purpose**

Tunisia has been living a decade of democratic transition since 2011. In this new context, the civil society has been fervently expressing claims for democracy and social justice through creating thousands of NPOs (23456 NPOs in 2020 against 9000 established in 30 years up to 2010). However, this shift seems to be misleading, as only 3000 NPOs are actually active, indicating that NPOs are struggling to sustain their activities and ensure their survival. The purpose of this study is to uncover the factors hindering NPOs activities and survival.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out using a purposive sample of 32 NPOs members in two main economic and touristic cities -Tunis and Sousse- selected using snow ball method. A considerable amount of qualitative data was produced (400 pages of text). This seems representative of Tunisian citizens' inclination to protest in the new prevailing political and social context. The data collection benefited from the freedom of speech gained after the 2011 civilian uprising as interviewees were enthusiastic in voicing their opinions.

### **Findings**

Two main categories of inhibitors were identified. First, endogenous inhibitors including (i) inhibitors under the control of the NPO (i.e. use of illegal and foreign sources of funding, limited financial resources, unavailability of NPOs' members, short term planning, conflicts between managers, autocratic leadership, organisational support, activities diversification and organisational justice, leadership and communication skills, "*NPO culture*", members' opportunistic behaviour and, generation gap) (ii) inhibitors related to NPOs inter-relationships: stiff competition, unfair and dishonest competition, lack of collaboration, trust and communication between NPOs. Second, exogenous inhibitors, i.e. perceived unethical practices and image transfer, economic crisis, foreign funding sources and the media.

### **Research limitations/implications**

This study has some limitations mainly due to the sample size and characteristics of the selected interviewees. In addition, data was collected in only two regions (Tunis and Sousse). Therefore, the results lack generalisability.

### **Practical implications**

The findings highlight the critical impact of the inhibitors under the control of NPOs compared to those out of their control. NPOs in crisis context, could overcome these inhibitors by ensuring congruence between the NPOs' mission, objectives and activities and designing suitable marketing strategies.

### **Originality/value**

This study contributes to elucidate this complex circular system of exchange and its inhibitors in challenging and understudied context. It offers support to Bagozzi's (1974; 1975; 1994; 2011) calls for uncovering the factors constraining or facilitating exchanges that have an impact going beyond the relationship between three or more partners and the conditions that govern these exchanges. **Moreover, and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical attempt to support Bagozzi's (1994) conceptualisation. It also brings an update to NPOs' data and marketing strategy in a region near the crossroads of Middle Eastern, North African and Western influences.**

**Keywords:** Not For Profit Organisations (NPOs), endogenous and exogenous inhibitors, NPOs' inter-relationship, circular exchange system.

### **Introduction**

Non-for profit organisations (NPOs) are non-governmental organisations offering services or products for vulnerable members of the public (Manville and Broad, 2013; Windrum, 2014). NPOs contribute largely to the society with their missions, ideas, programmes or services (Blery *et al.*, 2010; Bennett, 2018) that they undertake or implement in many sectors i.e. arts/culture/heritage, charities/philanthropy, economic development, education, health, religion, social, sport, and sustainability activities (Kirchner *et al.*, 2018; Windrum, 2014). In 2016, the US, New Zealand, Canada and the UK had the highest rate in terms of contribution of NPOs to their GDPs respectively (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2016).

Despite their contribution to the economy, NPOs are facing many challenges in their day-to-day activities and are struggling to meet their objectives and insure their survival. Actually, in a context characterized by an increasing number of NPOs (Lefroy and Tsarenko, 2014; Hadded *et al.* 2016), the resource scarcity (Seo, 2016), the application of financial adjustments, and the government tendency to subcontract part of the public services through

call for tenderer (Archambault, 2012; Sladden and Spears 2015; Abramson *et al.*, 2018), these organisations are increasingly competing for funds (Sladden and Spears, 2015). They also strive to overcome growing regulation rigidity (Magnani and Osti, 2016), divergent political interests and inappropriate objectives (Strømsnes *et al.*, 2009; Frangonikolopoulos, 2014), unethical behaviour of some organisations (Durand, 2014), public and donators' scepticism towards NPOs (Gálvez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2017). The last economic and financial crisis decreased voluntary work and organisation's innovation capability and, as a result, increased NPOs vulnerability (Archambault, 2012). Moreover, difficult and unstable market conditions resulted in constraints such as cuts in governmental funding, reductions in private giving, increased competition from hybrid social enterprise organisations forcing NPOs to look for alternatives sources of sponsoring and forms of alliances (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007; Lopez-Gamero *et al.*, 2011; Lefroy and Tsarenko, 2014; Abramson *et al.*, 2018; Haut Conseil à la vie associative, 2019).

In some non-western countries, the vulnerability of NPOs seems to be even more critical. In this regard, recent turmoil in some countries of the MENA region, i.e. The Arab Spring movement starting from Tunisia, led to significant changes in the regulation of the Not for Profit sector (Decree 2011-88 du 24 September, 2011) aiming to facilitate the process of NPOs creation. As a result, Tunisia has witnessed a significant shift in the number of **NPOs (IFEDA<sup>1</sup>, 2016) reaching 19000 organisations in 2016**, against 9000 in 2010 (IFEDA, 2020). Additional data (IFEDA, 2020) report 23456 NPOs in Tunisia covering sectors such as education (19,59%), culture (19,76%); sport (12,01%), social (11,16%), development (10,39%), scientific (Scientifique 7,49%), etc. and contributing to the social economy including the social enterprise and voluntary sector, religious charity as well as participative democracy (de Facci, 2019). The increase of the number of NPOs in Tunisia was supported by a huge overflow of foreign aid, security assistance, loans, and investment provided by the IMF, NATO countries, the US, EU and other Arab countries (Klaas and Dirsus, 2018).

However, this large increase in the number of NPOs is misleading, as only 3000 NPOs were operational in 2016 as reported by Unicef Tunisia in 2016. This organisation considers that Tunisian NPOs are “à la carte” organisations characterised with a short term vision and a lack of the necessary skills to manage specific issues. This raises concerns about the ability of the Tunisian NPOs to identify and interact with relevant stakeholders and the lack of the necessary skills required to address existing issues (Unicef Tunisia, 2016; Kaabi, 2018), but

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<sup>1</sup> Le Centre d'Information, de Formation, d'Études et de Documentation sur les Associations

also, questions their capacity to overcome the constraints they are facing in carrying out their activities, fulfilling their financial (e.g. fundraising) and non-financial (e.g. employees motivation, customer satisfaction) objectives as a goal driving organisation (Iwu *et al.*, 2015). We advocate that NPOs' survival is determined by its ability to achieve these objectives. Therefore, this study attempts to uncover the factors that inhibit the activities and survival of NPOs in the Tunisian context.

By pursuing this objective, we contribute to recent calls to question the ability of the not for profit sector to increase social capital (Potluka *et al.*, 2017) through the identification of the factors that impede the implementation of NPOs activities and hence the suggestion of the appropriate strategies. This is even more critical considering the challenges impeding NPOs activities and threatening their fragile equilibrium (Klaas and Dirsus, 2018; Cherif, 2018; Forbes, 2019) as they depend largely on their stakeholders for resources and funding to achieve their objectives, and they are witnessing decreasing resources due to State disengagement (Potluka and Svecova, 2019), more restrictive legislation for financial accountability and increasing competition between the hodgepodge NPOs for funding (Klaas and Dirsus, 2018).

The present study also allows to bridge some identified gaps in the NPOs literature pertaining to the contexts where the studies on this sector were most conducted and to the suitability of adopting some theories, strategies and practical recommendations to non-western contexts (Kurfi, 2013). Indeed, the not for profit sector issues seem to be largely studied in the Western world compared to the MENA region (Casey, 2016; von Schnurbein, Perez and Gehringer, 2018). It also sheds more light on the factors that affect or encourage civil-society development, especially in states in crisis as suggested by Volpi and Clark (2019).

Furthermore, Bagozzi (2011) calls for uncovering the processes and factors constraining or facilitating exchanges that have an impact that goes beyond the relationship between three or more partners and the conditions that govern these exchanges. We believe the flow of exchanges between NPOs and their stakeholders embodies similar characteristics. Indeed, the impact of NPOs' activities oversteps the immediate social entity they serve and the stakeholders involved in (e.g. donors, public authorities) as they aim to generate a long term social impact by fostering civic engagement and leadership, driving economic growth, strengthening the fabric of the communities and by creating more equitable and thriving communities (National Council of Nonprofits, 2020). For instance, in the Arab Spring context (i.e. Tunisia), NPOs and civil society in general, have played a major role in the

political and social change in laying down the conditions of the social contract, the promotion of inclusion, equality and social capital (Baker; 2015; Kefi, 2015).

Despite the recognition of the NPOs and civil society's pivotal role in these countries, Casey (2016) noted that the most significant gap in research on NPOs is the small representation of Arab countries due mainly to the preponderance of single-party regimes restricting the activities of the civil society and the work of internal and external researchers. More interestingly, this context is highly challenging as it has been undergoing deep political, ideological and social crises since the civilian uprising of 2011. In this line, Ben Salem (2015) pointed to the prevalence of an unfavourable economic outlook and a very unstable security situation that have added to the complexity of this context laying out the scene for a potential deep social crisis. This study draws on qualitative data collected in two main economic and touristic cities i.e. Tunis and Sousse, and brings an update to NPOs' data and marketing strategy in a region near the crossroads of Middle Eastern, North African and Western influences. This study also contributes to identify the critical factors NPOs must deal with in order to ensure their survival in a context characterised by uncertainty and risk including physical risk i.e. terrorism.

#### **Factors affecting NPOs survival**

NPOs are increasingly vulnerable (NCVO, 2015). According to Altman (2016), "Half Of Non-profits Are Set Up To Fail", despite their contribution to the economy worldwide. O'Brien (2010, p. 339) claimed that organisations are often "stuck in the middle" trying to maintain legitimacy while undergoing pressure to conform to professional norms...and faced increasing isomorphic pressures derived from changes in funding and the need to justify its performance, which in turn weakened the legitimacy of the organisation" (p. 355). It becomes crucial to identify the factors affecting their survival. The NPOs literature suggests two categories of factors: internal and external.

#### **Internal factors**

Internal factors that affect NPOs activities and survival could be classified into three (3) categories: 1- Lack of volunteers' engagement and retention; 2- Conflicts between paid employees and volunteers, 3- NPOs reaction to market conditions.

#### ***Lack of volunteers' engagement and retention***

Volunteers, the backbone of NPOs (Alfes *et al.*, 2017), play a key role in NPOs survival (Ferrand-Bechmann, 2008; Mori *et al.*, 2019; Crotty and Ljubownikow, 2019), particularly

with the recent increase of the number of NPOs (Lorente-Ayala *et al.*, 2019). Volunteers are originally called militants - NPOs members, paid and unpaid- who explicitly identify themselves with the aims, objectives, actions and style of the NPO and voice their ideas, opinions about a cause or a person through their activities in the NPOs (Daled, 2000).

Volunteers engage with the NPOs by investing time, money, personnel, and other resources (Weaver *et al.*, 2019) to contribute to a cause through their involvement with the NPO (Brodiez, 2004), temporary or not, and with no expectation for any kind of incentives (Ferrand-Bechmann, 2008) i.e. financial incentives (Alfes *et al.*, 2017).

Volunteers' engagement is critical for both NPOs and volunteers themselves (Gallopel-Morvan *et al.*, 2008). For the former, volunteers represent a tremendous resource as they contribute to their survival through conducting programmes, raising funds, serving clients, reducing costs (The US Bureau of Labour statistics, 2016; Malinen and Harju, 2017). For individuals, engaging with NPOs enables them to act publicly (Kaldor, 2003). According to Scholzman *et al.* (1999) volunteering leverages individual capacities, contributes to community building and nurtures democratic values. Volunteers' engagement with NPOs is also found to contribute to healthy and productive ageing and provide older people social, physical, and cognitive benefits (Jongenelis *et al.*, 2017; Grimm and Dietz, 2018).

Despite its importance, gaining volunteers' engagement represents a major challenge for NPOs' activities and survival (Lorente-Ayala *et al.*, 2019). The US Bureau of Labour Statistics (2016) and Grimm and Dietz (2018) reported that volunteering in the US is decreasing and highlighted the lack of youth engagement in civil society, with the lowest volunteer rates (18.4%) registered among youth aged 20 to 24. In Tunisia, notwithstanding the excitement towards the transitional justice in 2012, disillusion eroded civil society engagement in the not for profit sector (Lamont and Pannwitz, 2016; Unicef Tunisia, 2016). Besides, Tunisian youth engagement towards NPOs is low especially in underdeveloped regions where only 3% of rural youth participate in civil society organisations (Mansouri, 2020).

The lack of volunteers' engagement can be explained by different factors: (1) factors related to the casual nature of the volunteering role and job (Cottin-Marx *et al.*, 2017); (2) personal factors - lack of time and motivation, fear of being unable to contribute or fear to contribute to an unprofessional NPO, perception of volunteering as being a stressful activity and a frustrating barrier to their goal attainment, perception of organisational support (The US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2016; Nencini *et al.*, 2016; Harp *et al.*, 2017; Grimm and Dietz,

2018; Huynh *et al.*, 2014; Malinen and Harju, 2017) and volunteering perceived as a pastime for retired or inactive rich people (Gallopel-Morvan *et al.*, 2008); (3) organisation factors e.g. NPOs' lack of exposure, transparency and communications (Gallopel-Morvan *et al.*, 2008; Malinen and Harju, 2017; Sundram *et al.*, 2018; Akingbola, et al., 2019); (4) Macro-societal factors e.g. the absence of a volunteering culture, the political and ideological context signaling the disengagement and the failure of government, could influence their engagement, satisfaction, commitment and turnover intention (Gallopel-Morvan *et al.*, 2008; Malinen and Harju, 2017; Akingbola, et al., 2019).

Understanding the factors behind volunteers' lack of engagement is critical for NPOs as it could lead to a lack of attendance and representation in the NPOs board meetings (Mayaux, 2009), increase the tensions between volunteers and paid managers and consequently create poor working conditions (Nencini *et al.*, 2016) and increase the propensity to leave (Bales, 1996; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Huynh *et al.*, 2014; Malinen and Harju, 2017; Sundram *et al.*, 2018).

#### ***Wages and conflicts between paid and unpaid labour in NPO***

NPOs are particular organisations where paid and unpaid members work together to fulfil their mission (Bittschi *et al.*, 2015). Members' wages are often lower than those of members working in for profit organisations (Lochard *et al.*, 2011) because of NPOs' inability to pay competitively (Nonprofit HR, 2015) and the assumption about NPOs members' propensity to volunteer (Bales, 1996). However, the wages level may depend on NPOs' sector and location, NPOs' number and competition and NPO's tax regulations e.g. wages are relatively high in non-profit hospitals (King and Lewis, 2017). In addition, NPOs' members often face several constraints including massive workload (Non Profit HR, 2015; Kim and Charbonneau, 2020), poor task assignment, lack of mentoring and guidance from the board of directors, and negative social acceptability (Gateau, 2010). As a result, NPOs struggle to retain their members (Gateau, 2010; Nonprofit HR, 2015).

Moreover, conflicts between paid and unpaid NPOs' members could arise because of their lack of cooperation between both categories of members (Ferrand-Bechmann, 2008). Such conflicts could generate tensions (Broschak and Davis-Blake, 2006; Gateau, 2010) that may be exacerbated by inappropriate rewards and power balance (Alfes *et al.*, 2017). As a result, unpaid members could potentially feel undervalued compared to paid peers (Andreasen and Kotler, 2003). Other conflicts within NPOs -such as those between board members and managers due to volunteers' act of communication and misunderstanding of the objectives



and roles in the NPOs- could also take place (Ferrand-Bechmann, 2008; Fortin, 2016). Roza *et al.* (2018) argued that it is essential to understand the dynamic underpinning the collaboration between all categories of members in order for NPOs to be able to provide their services.

### ***NPOs reaction to market conditions***

NPOs operate in difficult environmental conditions that are challenging their economic sustainability (Lewis, 2014; Omar *et al.*, 2014). In recession time, NPOs are particularly threatened by the decrease of private donations, the most important source of funding (Garcia-Rodriguez and Romero-Merino, 2020), putting managers under the pressure to ensure the organisation strategic agility and adapt to market turbulence (Lefroy and Tsarenko, 2014).

However, the challenging economic environment could potentially push NPOs' managers to excessively focus on rising funds which could deviate them from the cause they defend (Gainer, 2010) and engender "mission creep" (Andreasen and Kotler, 2003) and donors' mistrust (Durand, 2014). In addition, NPOs survival in a competitive and challenging environment depends on their ability to compete for existing sources of funding and to develop new resources from the market through networking with different stakeholders (Omar *et al.* 2014; Álvarez-González *et al.* 2017). Based on Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependence perspective, Yanacopulos (2005) argued that NPOs' survival highly depends on their ability to deal with the external environment where they operate.

### **External Factors**

External factors that affect NPOs activities and survival could be classified into five (5) categories: 1- political and economic factors; 2-media coverage, 3-NPOs competition for funding, 4- NPOs relationships with for profit organisations, and 5- unethical practices in the not for profit sector.

### ***Political and economic factors***

The NPO sector is weakened by political changes and economic crises, which can reduce the government (Eschman *et al.*, 2011; Lefroy and Tsarenko, 2014; NCVO, 2015) and private funding (Forbes, 2019; Garcia-Rodriguez and Romero-Merino, 2020). According to Amnesty International (2019) and Göll *et al.* (2019), governments across the world are increasingly coercing NPOs to comply with stricter accountability measures and bureaucratic procedures. This is problematic for NPOs as they cannot fulfil their activities and contribute to the

economy if governments' and sponsors' fundings are limited (Mitra and Kumar, 2015) and private donations are reduced (Garcia-Rodriguez and Romero-Merino, 2020). Cases from France (Bourgeois et Brachet, 2003), Norway (Strømsnes *et al.*, 2009), Greece (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014) and Australia (Lefroy and Tsarenko, 2014) show that government support is critical for NPOs to secure their funding and to ensure their survival (Abramson *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, a government lack of engagement could potentially engender the complexity of fundraising and NPOs resources management because NPOs are likely to adopt a "doing more with less" philosophy (Kim and Charboneau, 2020). The recent worldwide political changes (e.g. the Arab spring; the spread of right-wing, racist and populist movements in the USA and Europe) and social unrest (e.g. Gilets Jaunes, Black Lives Matter) stress the need for NPOs to "rethink funding priorities and consider broader partnerships to advance the common good" according to Forbes (2019).

#### **Media coverage**

Although the media are increasingly focusing on civil society related topics, their coverage of NPOs remains marginalised (Ceptureanu *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, traditional media (Newspapers, Television, etc.) are much more concerned with certain news (celebrity, sports, technology, etc.) compared to other topics related to education, health and community (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014). This media behaviour may impede NPOs' exposure to the target public, limit their access to funds and consequently threaten their existence. In this line, Fougier (2008) claimed that the anti-globalisation movement, comprising a number of active NPOs, lost interest because of a lack of media coverage. Paradoxically, issues that incriminate certain NPOs, e.g. corruption, are widely covered in the media (Driscoll, 2017); and the media tempt to generalise some NPOs bad behaviour to others in the sector (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014; Driscoll, 2017). Such media information processing about these NPOs could damage NPOs credibility and raise scepticism about NPOs actions and objectives (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014; Driscoll, 2017; Forbes, 2019). Therefore, the media could be an important external force constraining NPOs and hindering their objectives achievement.

#### ***NPOs relationship with For Profit Organisations***

The number of NPOs has significantly increased (McKeever, 2018) generating more competition for funding (World NGOs Day, 2018; Forbes, 2019) particularly, those from For

Profit Organisations. Indeed, governments usually fund a small number of large NPOs (Eschman *et al.*, 2011), leaving hundreds of thousands of small and medium NPOs to rely mainly on For Profit Organisations donations (Simpson *et al.*, 2011). Hence, NPOs' relationship with the For Profit Organisations is critical (Álvarez-González, 2017; Garcia-Rodriguez and Romero-Merino, 2020). Such cross-sector and social-oriented relationships are expected to benefit both partners and create positive social change (AL-Tabbaa *et al.*, 2014).

Moreover, for profit organisations have complex motivations to engage and support NPOs (Wymer and Samu, 2003; Kottasz, 2003; Valor, 2006). For instance, these organizations are increasingly required to be socially responsible, which expands funding opportunities for NPOs (AL-Tabbaa *et al.*, 2014; Álvarez-González *et al.*, 2017). Such opportunities can be secured if the NPOs demonstrate their ability to generate social and economic returns for their for profit partner's investment in social responsibility. Indeed, these relationships could be compromised by NPOs perceived lack of reliability and appeal (AL-Tabbaa *et al.*, 2014; Barroso-Méndez *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, in order to build strong bonds with for profit organisations practitioners as well as scholars need to further understand these motivations.

#### ***NPOs competition for funding***

In addition to the for profit organisations' scepticism towards NPOs, a large number of NPOs are competing for financial resources (Basri and Stiti-Nabiha, 2010; Phillips, 2012; Ramadan and Pilo, 2014; Hsu and Yen, 2020). The Non Profit Finance Fund Survey (2018)<sup>2</sup> identified financial sustainability (62 per cent), raising funding to cover full costs (57 per cent) as NPOs top challenges. The competition for funding between NPOs is exacerbated particularly when NPOs pursue similar objectives and causes and have unclear positioning, hence, confusing the donors (Barbier, 2005).

Additionally, fundings are influenced by different factors such as donors' low income (Breeze and Lloyd, 2013), their lack of trust in NPOs, their preference to directly help friends or family, and their presupposition that only governments should support NPOs (AL-Tabbaa *et al.*, 2014; Klaas and Dirsus, 2018; Barroso-Méndez *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, NPOs poor financial reporting could dissuade donor support (Petrovits, *et al.*, 2011) and potentially compromise the mission of the NPOs (Cloutier, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted among 3,400 leaders of nonprofits across all 50 states and a wide range of sizes, missions, and work areas (<https://nff.org/learn/survey>)

### ***Unethical practices in the not for profit sector***

NPOs wrongdoing is escalating (OECD, 2012; Mohamed *et al.*, 2019). Similar to any economic sector, the not for profit sector is not exempt from unethical practices and NPOs can be vulnerable to the opportunistic behaviour of their managers (Fontanel *et al.*, 2009; Mayaux, 2009; Hadjeras, 2013). Because of their characteristics, NPOs are more likely to be challenged by “public disillusionment” in case of wrongdoing (Leat, 1994; Salamon, 1995; c.f. Gibelman and Gelman, 2004). In fact, NPOs values and ideology, the nature of their organisational structure and their poor accountability put them at risk to various deviances (product, property, political), and nurture conflict among NPOs members (Nair and Bhatnagar, 2011). Wrongdoing and deviance could diminish the credibility of the NPOs and reduce funding opportunities and volunteering (Durand, 2014; Fotaki, 2019).

The above discussion puts the emphasis on the external and internal factors constraining the NPOs survival and activities. Drawing on Bagozzi (1994, p.156) conceptualisation of marketing exchange system and extending it more explicitly to the not for profit sector, we argue that NPOs are social exchange actors whose behaviour is “being embedded in a complex system of facilitators and inhibitors with some under control of the parties and some part of the social fabric ...” and contend that Bagozzi’s framework offers a holistic representation of the complex system of exchange in between NPOs and between NPOs and their stakeholders e.g. businesses donors which are more profit oriented for most of them (Potluka and Svecova, 2019). Indeed, NPOs are facing challenges impeding their activities and threatening their fragile equilibrium (Dhakal, 2015; Klaas and Dirsus, 2018; Cherif, 2018; Forbes, 2019) as they are depending largely on their stakeholders for resources (e.g. funding, members) in order to achieve their objectives, and they are witnessing decreasing resources due to State disengagement (Potluka and Svecova, 2019), more restrictive legislation for financial accountability and increasing competition between the hodgepodge NPOs for funding (Klaas and Dirsus, 2018).

Moreover, Helmig *et al.*, (2014) called for more research addressing the not for profit sector issues. von Schnurbein, Perez and Gehringer (2018) stated that most of the studies addressing NPOs were carried out in “North America (8.4%), Western Europe (23.4%), Eastern Europe (40.7%) and (25%) in both MENA region (starting in 2005) and Asia and Latin America (starting in 2008)”, thus, emphasising the paucity of research on NPOs in the MENA region. Kurfi (2013) claimed that the theories developed in Western world are not suitable for other

regions (e.g. Africa and the global south in general) because of differences in countries' histories and the regime type in the country.

The 2011 civil unrest in Tunisia that later spread to other MENA countries led to deep changes in the market conditions (Kéfi, 2015) and significant increase in the number of NPOs (Klaas and Dirsus, 2018; Szalai, 2018, Fortier, 2019). The lack of research on NPOs limits the understanding of their role, their contribution to the civil society mobilisation, and hinders the comprehension of the civil society motivations to take part in the democratic transition through their enrolment in NPOs (Hudakova, 2019; Mori *et al.*, 2019).

### Research method

A qualitative study is carried out to explore the factors influencing Tunisian NPOs activities and survival (Miles et al., 2014). Thirty-two (32) semi-structured interviews of 60 minutes, on average, were conducted using a thematic interview guide. The sample size was determined according to the theoretical saturation criteria (Mucchielli, 1996; Guest *et al.*, 2005). Consent was granted by the respondents to tape record the interviews. The respondents were selected using the snowball method (Johnston and Sabin, 2010) to include of 11 women and 21 men from different age and socio-economic categories in Tunis and Sousse operating in different sectors of activities (Economic development, charity and social, legal, citizenship, sport and environmental, scientific cultural and artistic). The interviewees are board members of NPOs with different status in the organisations e.g. Vice Director, Head of Department, Honorary Members (ex- Executive directors providing help and advice to current boards), trainer, executive functional. They have been working in the not for profit sector for a duration ranging from 2 to 42 years with an average work experience of 8 years (Table 1).

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

Interviewee	Gender <sup>a</sup>	SPC**	Location	NPOs sector	Role in the NPO	Years of experience
I 1	M	Student	Sousse	Economic development	Vice President	5
I 2	M	Manager	Tunis	Economic development	Executive Director	6
I 3	M	Student	Sousse	Economic development	Executive Functional member	6
I 4	F	Employee	Sousse	Social	Secretary- General	21
I 5	M	Employee	Sousse	Legal	Honorary Member	4
I 6	M	Manager	Sousse	Economic development	Honorary Member	7
I 7	F	Student	Tunis	Economic development	Vice President	5
I 8	M	Employee	Tunis	Economic development	Executive Director	6
I 9	F	Liberal profession	Sousse	Legal	Executive Functional Member	6

I 10	M	Manager	Sousse	Social	Executive Functional Member	5
I 11	M	Employee	Tunis	Citizenship	Executive Director	6
I 12	F	Employee	Tunis	Citizenship	Head of department	6
I 13	M	Student	Tunis	Economic development	Executive Functional Member	7
I 14	M	Employee	Sousse	Citizenship	Trainer	42
I 15	M	Student	Tunis	Economic development	Honorary Member	5
I 16	M	Manager	Sousse	Sport and environmental	Executive Functional Member	16
I 17	F	Student	Sousse	Citizenship	Executive Functional Member	2
I 18	M	Student	Sousse	Scientific	Head of Department	5
I 19	M	Employee	Tunis	Economic development	Executive Director	5
I 20	M	Student	Sousse	Economic development	Executive Director	4
I 21	M	Student	Sousse	Scientific	Honorary Member	8
I 22	F	Student	Sousse	Scientific	Head of Department	6
I 23	M	Employee	Sousse	Economic development	Trainer	6
I 24	M	Employee	Sousse	Economic development	Executive Director	13
I 25	M	Student	Sousse	Charity and social	Executive director	6
I 26	F	Employee	Sousse	Legal	Executive Functional Member	5
I 27	F	Student	Sousse	Development	Vice President	12
I 28	F	Liberal profession	Sousse	Cultural, artistic	Executive Director	6
I 29	F	Employee	Tunis	Citizenship	Executive Director	5
I 30	M	Employee	Tunis	Citizenship	Executive Director	6
I 31	M	Student	Tunis	Economic development	Executive Functional Member	5
I 32	F	Employee	Tunis	Economic development	Executive Director	6

\*M= Male, F=Female, \*\* SPC=Socio-professional category

### *Context of the study*

The recent Arab spring starting in Tunisia unleashed concerns for democracy and social justice (Heydemann, 2018). One of the consequences was the radical change in the NPOs regulation resulting from the promulgation of the decree-law of the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2011 (2011-88), which triggered an exponential increase of their number and missions. Klaas and Dirsus (2018, p.8) reported that 80% of the civic associations in Tunisia are community-based organizations with widely divergent mandates and missions e.g. electoral reform, policy making, economic reform, human rights protection, democratic innovation, community outreach.

Since January 2011, Tunisia has been living a decade of democratic transition (Hudakova, 2019). Before, the civil society role in the country was limited to apolitical social and cultural non-governmental organisations because of the restrictions imposed by the previous authoritarian regime (Klaas and Dirsus, 2018; Fortier, 2019; Gray, 2019). With the civil uprising, and taking advantage of the legal opportunities and the political context, Tunisian

citizens have been voicing their opinions and values through creating thousands of NPOs (Kéfi, 2015; Fortier, 2019; Hudakova, 2019). According to Colombo (2018) and Yeldez and Ben Yahmed (2018), freeing expression in the MENA region after the 2011 civil unrest, has influenced citizens' relationship to state institutions and policies exhibited through their emancipatory claims e.g. for inclusion, moderation and participation through dialogue and compromise (Kéfi, 2015; Thomas, 2018; Gabsi, 2019).

Whilst freedom of speech could be seen as a positive factor that could benefit the data collection in this study, it represents a double-edge sword for our study because the selected interviewees can be excessively enthusiastic in voicing their opinions after being muzzled during decades (Colombo *et al.*, 2018). Tunisian citizens are more inclined to protest in the new prevailing political and social context.

#### *Safeguard for data collection*

Britten (1995, p.251) stated: "semi-structured interviews are conducted on the basis of a loose structure consisting of open ended questions that define the area to be explored, at least initially, and from which the interviewer or interviewee may diverge in order to pursue an idea in more detail". Hubbell (2003, p.196) added that « the open-ended interview is an exchange of information and a joint construction of meaning (...), (It) allows for the surfacing of more serendipitous and potentially interesting information than a questionnaire”

In data collection that uses semi-structured interviews, authenticity is challenged by the environmental context of the interviewees (Hubbell, 2003; Broom *et al.*, 2009), the researcher's biography, and the participant's psychological state (Broom *et al.*, 2009). Semi-structured interviews give participants, particularly those who feel marginalised, the opportunity to voice their views and to positively present themselves (Reinharz, 1979; c.f. Hubbell, 2003). Collecting data from members of the Tunisian civil society is prone to be challenged by the factors affecting the Tunisian context.

The selected participants were very keen to be interviewed reflecting “an unconscious need for acceptance” (Hubbell, 2003, p. 201). In such a situation, Hubbell (2003) recommended not to be too close fitting to the questions/themes of the interview guide and to give interviewees some latitude to move the discussion to unanticipated directions whilst maintaining their reflexivity and awareness, and taking into account their moods and nuances. Liebermann (1999, p. 49) added that it is important to remain open to the local contingencies of the field inquiry challenging the interviewer's plan, and, to consider these contingencies as

an opportunity to find out more about the interviewees arguing that “the contingencies of field inquiry are not to be viewed only as obstacles to one’s inquiries but as opportunities to learn which inquiries are the ones that really matter”. Consequently, when conducting the interviews, we have particularly endorsed local contingencies’ factors as well as NPO specific factors affecting the interviewees.

#### *Data analysis*

The tape-recorded data was transcribed to produce 400 pages of text. A thematic analysis was conducted. The verbatim of the interviews was coded and categorised into three classes of factors and then reduced to two main categories: inhibitors under the control of NPOs and inhibitors part of the social fabric. The interviews were conducted in French, as Tunisian citizens are fluent in this language. In the findings, extracts from the interviews were used to support the identified themes. The quotations were translated to English and back translated to French by two experts in both French and English language (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

#### **Results and discussion**

First of all, the study results offer evidence to the important role of NPOs. The majority of the interviewees (23 out of 32) acknowledged unequivocally the contribution of the NPOs activities for them, personally, and for the society *at large*. These activities are considered as an opportunity for them to mould their personality and develop their personal and professional soft and hard skills. In this line, one of the interviewees stated: “*it enables us to be aware of our own strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, skills, and allows us to improve those skills and put them into practice*” (I 13, Executive Functional Member; Economic Development Organisation). Another staff member added: “*It was particularly difficult the year I joined (The Organisation) due to the revolution and the economic recession etc., since for profit organisations were reluctant to fund NPOs, (...). In fact, I had to contact more than fifty companies to obtain the support of five donors, and this was an opportunity for me to learn how to design a speech, how to convince people, how to manage one’s responsiveness and time. In fact, and surprisingly, when you join an NPO, you improve in your studies. Also, you learn how to organise yourself, in general*” (I 32, Executive Director; Economic Development Organisation).

Such result is particularly interesting as it suggests that NPOs complement and reinforces the learning acquired in education institutions and fosters the capabilities and competitiveness of Tunisian graduates in the job market. In Tunisia, critics pointed at the mismatch between the



demand of the labour market and the focus of the education system on a massive quantitative education in Tunisia (Schaefer, 2017), it is not surprising that students look for alternative spaces to develop their professional skills.

Another student goes further to consider NPOs activities as vital for him and generate a form of addiction. He noted: *“Civic participation is a duty and a necessity, once you experience community life, it is like a drug, you become addicted”* (I 22, Head of Department; Scientific Organisation). This statement is in line with previous findings highlighting young Tunisians' awareness of the necessity to be more active in the civil society (Kéfi, 2015; Thomas, 2018; Gabsi, 2019).

Besides, NPOs and their activities are acknowledged to play a leading role in leveraging justice and equality in the Tunisian society. For instance, another interviewee stated *“... they represent a pillar, for example, to fight against injustices, inequalities, etc.”* (I 18, Head of Department, Scientific Organisation). For this interviewee, NPOs activities and civic participation, in general, are critical for a country like Tunisia, to aspire to a modern society where people could participate in decision-making and where governments are no more the only decision makers.

The above findings contribute to better grasp the motives underlying volunteers' adherence and commitment to an NPO. They add to anterior studies stressing the role of volunteers' previous experiences, interests and social bonds as key motivations to join an NPO (Nencini et al., 2016; Alfes et al., 2017). In our study, NPOs appear to be considered as a space where volunteers leverage their soft and hard skills, given the inability of the education system to fully meet the requirement of the labour market in Tunisia. Besides, our study reveals that engaging in an NPO in a post authoritarian and unstable context is contingent on people's awareness of their abilities and power to actively participate in the *“public weal”*. It also conveys a level consciousness amongst the interviewees as to their critical role in promoting justice and equality in the society by participating in NPOs activities.

Notwithstanding, 28 (out of 32) interviewees pointed out the threats that weigh upon NPOs activities. An Executive Director of an economic development organisation (I 32) contended: *“out of those registered 19,000 associations, approximately, many are ghost organisations”*. He added, *“(…), they are like empty shells; Actually, we don't deal with the 19.000 NPOs, but only with the most active, that we estimate to be a maximum of 3.000!”* This statement echoes a study result reporting that a large number of NPOs in Tunisia are hollow shells

(UNICEF Tunisia, 2016). As suggested by another interviewee the increase of the number of NPOs after the 2011 uprising does not reflect the harsh reality of NPOs in Tunisia signalling a more complex and vulnerable sector struggling for its survival.

The data analysis revealed two main categories of factors behind this depletion of NPOs activities. These categories are: (I) endogenous inhibitors, including i) inhibitors under the control of the NPOs and ii) inhibitors related to inter-relationship between the NPOs and (II) exogenous inhibitors.

### **I- Endogenous inhibitors**

#### *i) Inhibitors under the control of the NPO*

**Twelve (12)** key inhibitors of NPO activities and survival are identified. These inhibitors could be managed by the NPO summarised in the following table (Table 2).

**Table 2: Inhibitors under the control of the NPO**

Subcategories	Number of interviewees
Use of illegal and foreign sources of funding	25
Conflicts between managers	13
Limited financial resources	12
Unavailability of NPOs' members	12
Short term planning	11
Autocratic leadership	9
Lack of organisational support	9
Lack of activities diversification and perception of organisational justice	7
Lack of leadership and communication skills	6
Lack of "NPO culture"	6
Members' opportunistic behavior	4
Generation gap	4

*Use of illegal and foreign sources of funding.* The study results show that NPOs are facing many endogenous obstacles in performing their activities. According to the majority of our interviewees (25 out of 32), unrevealed sources of funding or covert funding constitute a major issue for NPOs. These illegal funds appear to be a significant threat to volunteers and

employees' retention in the suspected NPOs. They also seem to increase other NPOs vulnerability, particularly those with limited resources, due to their incapacity to compete in providing services to their target community. For these interviewees, the existence of scams and fraud within these organisations could restrain the continuity of their activities. In this line, an Trainor in an economic development organisation (I 23) declared: "*Personally, I know people who have left other organisations, and when I asked them "why did you leave the organisation?" "Does it no longer correspond to your philosophy?" The answer is "no, it is a scam, there is a lack of transparency, and I did not want to participate in this"*".

This statement suggests members' scepticism toward the NPOs coupled with negative perceptions of their activities and intentions might impact their propensity to leave. This impact might go beyond members' negative perception of the NPOs' activities and roles. It might influence the wider public perception and hinder civic engagement. A parallel could be drawn with recent studies showing that individual activism may induce scepticism toward CSR endeavours (Choi *et al.*, 2018).

In addition, such a result highlights the importance of the ethical conduct of the NPOs executives in building trust relationships with their employees/volunteers based on social objectives achievement -and not on short-term organisational objectives attainment-. Indeed, a large number of people choose to join the NPOs for social motivations i.e. help others, contributing to social welfare, etc.

It is worth noting that some authors have already expressed concerns about the consequences of NPOs' unethical behaviour on their credibility (Durand, 2014, Gálvez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2017; Fotaki, 2019). These unethical practices could weaken their ability to compete for funding (Fontanel *et al.*, 2009; Mayaux, 2009; Hadjeras, 2013; Klaas and Dirsus, 2019) and induce "public disillusionment" (Gibelman and Gelman, 2004) and diminish volunteering (Durand, 2014; Fotaki, 2019).

Our results offer support to previous studies in the Tunisian context (Fortier, 2019; Klaas and Dirsus, 2019) and beyond (Durand, 2014; Fotaki, 2019) and stress the need to develop NPOs credibility and trustworthiness. This is particularly important knowing that the funding environment is increasingly competitive and driven by donors' interest (Letsch, 2018) and volunteers' engagement (Thomas, 2018).

*Conflicts between managers* could disrupt, not only the functioning of the NPO but also its image (13 out of 32). A student member of a charity and social organisation said: "

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*continuous disagreements between the board members (which represent the core of the organisation), can damage the NPO image gradually. This is normal” (I 25, Executive Director, Charity and Social Organisation). Another student member of a development organisation said “If for example the Chairman of the board, who is the spokesman and the interface of the organisation, is hated by the members, the NPO is also hated” (I 31, Executive Functional Member; Economic Development Organisation). An interviewee added that “Internal conflicts could ruin projects; because when members talk about the conflicts that occur in the organisation to their friends in the public sector, this could destroy the organisation’s reputation and credibility” (I 32, Executive Director, Economic Development Organisation).*

Such results suggest that conflicts between the board of directors’ members could create a tense atmosphere and have a negative influence on the NPO functioning, its reputation and credibility. These results support Nolan (2015) and Fortin (2016) statements as to the critical role played by the Chair and the members of the board of directors in ensuring the proper functioning of the organisation (Fortin, 2016) and in fostering its reputation (Nolan, 2015).

These results also offer support to a direct effect of conflicts between the board of directors’ members on the NPO reputation and image. This link has not been identified in previous studies and constitutes one of our study’s contributions.

*Limited financial resources.* The lack of financial resources seems to be a major challenge for NPOs (12 out of 32). An executive in a development organisation stated, “*an NPO will end its activities, not because of the lack of managers, or handover and other management problems, it is more likely to be because of financial problems” (I 2, Executive Director; Economic Development Organisation). Previous studies suggested that sources of funding are becoming increasingly limited putting at risk the survival of the NPOs (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2014; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2017; Garcia-Rodríguez and Romero-Merino, 2020). To cope with this issue, some NPOs adopted new ways to raise funds, i.e. sponsorship, partnership, etc. Some authors have already stressed the need for NPOs to diversify their sources of funding (Froelich, 1999; Álvarez-González et al, 2017) and to raise funds through events that promote social or humanitarian causes (Higgins and Lauzon, 2003). More recently, some scholars have advocated the interest of developing partnership with for profit organisations and between NPOs to secure the stability of their sources of funding (Álvarez-González et al., 2017).*

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*Unavailability of NPOs' members.* Our interviewees (12 out of 32) identified the unavailability as critical to NPOs activities and survival. An interviewee noted: *"I have a family, I have many expenses, I cannot spend more than a day or two every week in the organisation; So the lack of availability is the primary obstacle to spending more time within the organisation"* (I 24, Executive Director; Economic Development Organisation). Accordingly, it appears that the interviewees feel under pressure because they are overwhelmed by their personal life, and, consequently, they lack time to dedicate to their volunteering activities. They struggle to manage their time between their private life and volunteering. Similar results are reported in the literature about members' daily life priorities and lack of time (The US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2016; Nencini *et al.*, 2016; Harp *et al.*, 2017; Grimm and Dietz, 2018) as important inhibitors of members' adherence to NPOs and withdrawal.

*Short term planning.* Our interviewees (11 out of 32) have also identified the lack of activities diversification, lack of planning and long-term vision as factors that threaten the NPOs activities and survival. One of them declared: *"There is no continuity, no thought behind a sound basis of the activities' scope. (...) When the activities stop (...) we publish some photos on Facebook, and that's it. If you access your profile you will find that Facebook is packed with photos of NPOs activities, everybody is trying to show that he/she is active, and just after, nothing. The reason is the absence of an annual action plan and any activities are performed on a one off basis"* (I 23, Trainor, Economic Development Organisation). Therefore, implementing a strategic marketing plan is crucial for NPOs to plan and implement their short and long-term objectives (McDonald and Payne, 1996). Additionally, a marketing strategy helps NPOs to generate resources i.e. volunteers (Yavas et Riecken, 1997), funds (Brady *et al.*, 2011; Pope *et al.*, 2009) and partnerships (Álvarez-González *et al.*, 2017).

It should also be noted that NPOs that have no clear objectives, risk to be rejected by citizens. In this regard, an Executive Director of an economic development organisation (I 24) reported: *"There is a major issue related to the objective statement. Several NPOs state that their objective is the development of the country, that it is not an objective per se (...). The organisation can end up doing something unrelated to its objectives. For example, a cultural NPO might run activities in a sport domain, (...). This lacks credibility"*. This statement reveals the importance of ensuring the congruence between the NPOs' mission, announced

objectives and their activities. To the best of our knowledge, this congruence has not been identified in previous research on NPOs as a determinant of their perceived credibility.

*The autocratic leadership* could be also damaging for NPOs. In fact, some members find (9 out of 32) it difficult to accept being administered by a Chair who adopts an autocratic leadership style (Simon and Ronoh, 2017). As one of our interviewees quoted: “*Many NPOs Chairmen try to enforce a particular leadership style. (...) They are dictators, so they think they do not have to listen to people, and they refuse to communicate with people*” (I 6, Honorary Member; Economic Development Organisation). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to identify the leadership style i.e. autocratic as an inhibitor of NPOs survival. How could we explain such a result? Does the context of the study have something to do with this result? We advocate that as the Tunisian 2011 uprising stands up to claim for employment, dignity and freedom, it's obvious that accepting to be led again by autocratic leaders may be frustrating and incongruent. More research is needed to tackle this issue of the appropriate leadership style for NPOs.

*Lack of organisation support.* Nine (9) interviewees (out of 32), evoked the lack of coaching, encouragement and appraisal as inhibitors hindering the activities of the NPOs and threatening their survival. One of them declared, “*The problem is the lack of coaching, we are assigned actions. At the beginning we feel that it's okay, but later we realise that we are left to fend for ourselves*” (I 27, Vice President, Development Organisation). Another added: “*No one tells you “good job”, “what you did is excellent”, “good luck”, “don't give up!” and, actually, this is demotivating*” (I 18, Head of Department; Scientific Organisation). Accordingly, it appears that the interviewed NPOs members are demotivated because of the lack of the support in the organisation. Consequently, demotivation might lead to volunteers' lack of engagement and propensity to leave (Andreasen et Kotler, 2003; The US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2016; Nencini *et al.*, 2016; Harp *et al.*, 2017; Grimm and Dietz, 2018; Huynh *et al.*, 2014; Malinen and Harju, 2017). Hence, it is essential to take into consideration the expectations and needs of the members to ensure the survival of the organisation (Pinho *et al.*, 2014).

*Lack of activities' diversification and perception of organisational justice.* Seven (7) interviewees (out of 32) revealed two sources of members' demotivation:

a) Lack of activities diversifications. Some interviewees pointed to the lack of diversity in the activities performed by the NPOs, which may lead to members' demotivation. An employee

in a development organisation reported: “NPOs have difficulty keeping their members because they have trouble in diversifying their activities. Actually, if the members perceive that NPOs are always doing the same activities, they are likely to feel bored and find it less exciting to continue working” (I 8, Employee; Development Organisation, Tunis). Hence, to enhance their effectiveness, NPOs have to develop strategies to motivate and retain their members. This could be achieved through employees’ motivation and satisfaction (Iwu *et al.*, 2015). According to Herzberg (1964), employees’ motivation and satisfaction are determined by intrinsic and extrinsic factors e.g. the nature of the work and the pay and working conditions. Similarly, the service marketing literature defends a positive influence of internal service quality on employees’ satisfaction, commitment and wellbeing (Sharma *et al.*, 2016; Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016; Hewagama *et al.*, 2019, etc.).

b) The perception of organisational justice. The content analysis also revealed some interesting results related to the perception of organisational justice. Some interviewees claimed that NPOs’ survival depends on the way the NPOs’ executive board deals with paid and unpaid volunteers. They pointed out some favouritism in the delivery and the rewarding of members actions based on their status. In this line, an interviewee stated that he resigned because the organisation became sectarian. He stated: “*Relatives of certain people (businessmen, for example) benefited from more bonuses; I think this is unfair and I stood up against this by handing in my resignation (...) I think after all it's about volunteering. (...) I have already enough on my plate, my studies and my family problems, so I resigned*” (I 25, Executive Director, Charity and Social Organisation). It should be noted that the perception of organisational justice is identified as a critical dimension in the employer-employee relationship as it allows workers to infer about their workplace realities and react to them (Konovsky, 2000 c.f. Cloutier *et al.*, 2018). This concept seems to be even more critical for NPOs as members are often volunteers or low-paid employees and the likelihood of resignation is higher, compared to the case of for profit organisations. To the best of our knowledge, this organisational justice as a factor that may influence volunteers' retention and consequently slow down NPOs activities and survival was not identified in previous studies.

*The lack of leadership and communication skills* could influence the board of directors’ sustainability according to the interviewees (6 out of 32). A Head of Department in a scientific organisation (I 22) stated: “*Some NPOs managers have no leadership skills, this is why their board fails*” (student, scientific organisation). Another claimed: “*A manager who*

*does not care and delivers poor work will lead the organisation to failure*” (I 19, Executive Director, Economic Development Organisation).

*Lack of “NPO culture”*. Six (6) of our interviewees out of 32, agreed that the “NPO culture” is missing in most Tunisian NPOs which threatens their survival. An interviewee explained: “NPO culture” means: *“to know how to work in a team, how to assign tasks, how to delegate tasks, how to find a balance between democracy and autocracy”* (I 25, Executive Director, Charity and Social Organisation). Another interviewee emphasised the importance of this NPO culture by noting: *“Some NPOs had to pay a penalty, simply because nobody told them that they have to declare taxes monthly, and they ended up having penalties without being notified. Also, some organisations do not know how to write a financial and moral report... The necessary know-how is lacking”* (I 32, Executive Director, Economic Development Organisation).

From the interviewees standpoint, NPO culture is assimilated to the concept of organizational culture defined as “a system of shared values, understandings and perspectives which are held in common by the organization’s members and which distinguishes it from other organizations” (Osula and Ng, 2014, p. 96)

Such a result points to a more critical issue relating to the lack of follow-up by public authorities as reported by The Tunisian Association of Governance (2014). It appears clearly that to improve their reporting and avoid penalties, many NPOs need more support and training (Aboramadan and Borgonovi, 2016, Bünzli, 2017).

The absence of an NPO culture is actually grounded in Tunisia history regarding NPOs action in the country. Indeed, the so-called “old regime” had a right of inspection over NPOs and the authorisations for the creation of NPOs obeyed strict and binding rules (Kéfi, 2015). Hence, the not for profit sector is still in its infancy; therefore, it is expected that organisations would be struggling to effectively manage their activities and achieve their objectives.

*Members’ opportunistic behaviour* is found to be irritating for some of our interviewees (4 out of 32). One of them declared: *“Some people join the NPO without a genuine interest for its activities, they just want to show off about being a member of the NPO; and in four, five months they are complaining about the results and expressing disapproving comments and judgments. Why are things not working? He/she doesn’t know because he/she has never got really involved with the NPOs activities”* (I 23, Trainor, Economic Development Organisation). Another employee added that the president of the NPO, to which he belongs,



is more concerned with the duration of his chairmanship in the NPO. According to the interviewees, a behaviour is opportunistic when the volunteer tries to take advantage of being part of the NPOs without actually contributing to its activities and expressing criticism against the lack of the NPOs effectiveness; which goes against the associative values (Laville, 2002).

*Generation gap.* It is worthy to note that a generational *gap* (4 out of 32) is identified as a factor that causes the withdrawal of NPOs' members. In this line, an executive functional member in an economic development organisation (I 3) declared: "A *thirty-five-year-old executive finds himself sitting at the same table with a student, a teenager of sixteen to seventeen, he cannot be comfortable, and that's normal. It's like a father and a son sitting at the same table, (...), they do not necessarily have the same vision*". Accordingly, it appears that younger volunteers might negatively perceive the generation gap. This could explain the lack of youth engagement in the civil society (Lamont and Pannwitz, 2016; Unicef Tunisia, 2016; Mansouri, 2020) and increase NPOs vulnerability. Therefore, a selective recruitment campaign is recommended to avoid a considerable age difference (Herman and Renz, 2000).

#### *ii) Inter-relationship between NPOs*

The content analysis highlights an increasing competition between NPOs particularly between those operating in the same sector and performing the same activities (4 out of 32 interviewees). According to an interviewee: "*Some organisations are competing between each other by undertaking the same activities, some of these NPOs are deliberately doing it, that is dishonest competition and it aims to weaken the other NPOs, particularly when the activity targets the same community*" (I 23, Trainor, Economic Development Organisation). Accordingly, it appears that dishonest competition between NPOs could be a source of tension that threatens their survival. In this regard, Barbier (2005) added that a high level of competition limits NPOs access to funding sources. The donors could be confused by NPOs competing on the same activities and therefore limit the NPOs access to the sources of funding.

In addition, innovation in NPOs activities becomes a necessity for survival in face of unfair and dishonest competition (Anwar *et al.*, 2020). This statement is clearly supported by another interviewee who argued that NPOs inability to adapt to their competitive environment and to develop new forms of collaboration, might threaten their competitive position. He noted "*Our NPO (cultural organisation) is 55 years old, until 2011 we were the*

*only one on the market, our NPO was amongst the biggest; After 2011, 18000 or 19000 NPOs were created and we were not able to adapt and collaborate with these newly created organisations. However, we were still thinking that we are the best, whilst the newly created organisations had become more professional and even had overtaken our organisation. A situation that we were unable to acknowledge and our organisation was unable to adapt to the changes that occurred in the civil society in Tunisia” (I 6, Honorary Member; Economic Development Organisation). This interviewee added: “ I think that the number of associations will certainly decrease and this is normal, funding are available, (...) for example, we are expecting a lot of funds to support NPOs’ activities in three critical domains: media, council elections and youth deradicalisation (...) so, it is not a funding issue, it is rather because the NPOs are not well organised to manage these funds and to be specialised”. He also emphasised: “ the main problem is the specialisation of the NPO, as NPOs apply for the available funds independently of their domain of activities. For instance when the Ministry of Women needs an NPO as a vis-à-vis, it is difficult for the Ministry to identify the right NPO, because they all do the same thing (...). For example, there are too many NPOs that are focusing on women issues”.*

Accordingly, NPOs inter-relationship is characterised by a blurred competitive position because they fail not only to comply with the specificities of their activity domain, but also, to develop collaborations with other NPOs. More importantly, these later seems to be hindered by the lack of trust between NPOs as they avoid to communicate openly on their projects even for NPO that are dedicated to facilitate their access to funding because of their mistrust. As noted by an interviewee, “we struggle to obtain timely data, (...) not only because they lack a “communication culture” but also because NPOs are reluctant to share information for fear of information leakage about their projects”. (I 32, Executive Director, Economic Development Organisation)

Moreover, this interrelationship seems to denote a stiff competition similar to the one observed in the for profit sector. Some NPOs even try to deliberately damage other NPOs’ images and assets, as reported by some of our interviewees.

To the best of our knowledge, this finding has not been previously identified and constitutes one of the contributions of our study. Such unethical competition practices represent another type of wrongdoing that could exacerbate the “public disillusionment” (Leat, 1994; Salamon, 1995; c.f. Gibelman and Gelman, 2004).

The study findings expanded the understanding of the endogenous inhibitors that are under the control of the NPOs. Compared to the existing literature, our results offer new insight by outlining two types of inhibitors under the control of the NPO and inhibitors related to the inter-relationship between NPOs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that explicitly details these inhibitors. Additionally, the results revealed new inhibitors such as conflict between the board of director members, the lack of congruence between the NPOs' mission, announced objectives and their activities, unethical competition practices, the leadership style, the perception of organisation justice, the "NPO culture" resulting from the political context, members' opportunistic behaviour and the generation gap.

## II- Exogenous Inhibitors

The content analysis revealed four main exogenous. These inhibitors seem to be critical for NPOs' activities and survival. Table 3 presents a summary of the citations' frequencies of these inhibitors:

**Table 3: Exogenous Inhibitors**

Subcategories	Number of interviewees
Perceived unethical practices and image transfer	23
Economic crisis	9
Foreign funding sources	7
The media	2

*Perceived unethical practices and image transfer.* More than half of our interviewees (23 out of 32) identified unethical practices as main external factors. One of them stated: "*There is a lack of trust between for profit organisations and NPOs before and after the revolution, (...); Unfortunately some NPOs operate in unethical domains i.e. terrorism funding, they affect consequently the work and image of organisations that have more conventional activities and operate on a more honest basis*". (I 20, Executive Director; Economic Development Organisation).

This statement offers support to some scholars claiming the occurrence of an image transfer process from one organisation to another (Prendergast *et al.*, 2016). In this line, Durand (2014) contended that the involvement of some NPOs in financing terrorism and money laundering activities could undermine the credibility of the whole not for profit sector and could foster public mistrust.

It should be noted that Kéfi (2015) pointed to the troublesome consequences of these unethical funding on NPOs activities, their relationships with their stakeholders, and on the civil society enrolment, in general. The author argued that “when considering the vitality of Tunisian civil society today, one mustn’t lose sight of the darker side of the coin, namely, the secret ties held by many associations with certain major political parties” (Kéfi, 2015, p.240). According to this author, parties use NPOs as funding pumps allowing them to display an impudent degree of wealth to organise their meetings, extend their networks in popular districts and offer gifts to needy families (school supplies for children, funds for marriages and circumcision ceremonies, household goods, etc.). Consequently, many NPOs depend largely on these funds and become accountable for these political parties. In this line, Kéfi (2015) added that these later benefit from other less transparent funding (cash and in kind) made by certain for profit organisations (local businessmen and foreign donors) to serve their interest among the policymakers, and via ‘shell’ NPOs. Despite the new legislation imposing some restrictions pertaining to funds and money transfer made to NPOs and the obligation to declare value added tax and assets (for senior executive members), it seems that these measures are not sufficient to overcome these challenges. Building on Ahmed *et al.* (2019), we recommend that NPOs develop governance and accountability mechanisms toward their stakeholders.

*Economic crisis.* Our interviewees (9 out of 32) also mentioned the economic crisis as a factor that can reduce funding sources. As one of our interviewees pointed out: “*There is an economic crisis in Tunisia, fewer people are making donations, it is more difficult to raise funding. That’s the problem*” (I 18, Head of Department; Scientific Organisation). This finding corroborates Lefroy and Tsarenko’s (2014, p.1960) assertion that the available resources, e.g. government and philanthropic funding, are reduced in a highly competitive environment. Therefore, it is important for NPOs to strategically analyse the economic environment and its potential impact on the sources of funding and find alternative ones (Eschman *et al.*, 2011; Garcia-Rodriguez and Romero-Merino, 2020). Additionally, in

contexts of economic crisis, Lefroy and Tsarenko (2014) suggest that NPOs concentrate their efforts on social objectives fulfilment in order to signal their competitiveness to stakeholders.

*Foreign funding sources.* Moreover, our interviewees (7 out of 32) reported that foreign funding sources could compromise NPOs activities and image. An Executive Director of a citizenship organisation based in Tunis (I 29) declared: “Some NPOs do not have the necessary skills to negotiate and to discuss the terms and conditions of foreign donors. What counts more for them is to be funded”. This might negatively influence the image of these NPOs. In Tunisia, being sponsored by a foreign entity often engenders public mistrust towards the organisation. An interviewee noted “it is not a good thing to be highly dependent on particular donors. For example, we were funded up to 80% by the European Union. (...) This leads to an unbalanced bargaining power and the donor is the main decision maker. (...). If you don't have any alternatives of funding sources, you need to comply with their requirements in terms of the activities to perform, the target public to serve, etc. yielding a distortion of the NPO project and its mission” (I 32, Executive Director, Economic Development Organisation). Therefore, dependence on particular donors, seems to represent another factor that may engender NPOs deviance from their mission and objectives qualified as “mission creep” (Andreasen and Kotler 2003).

For some interviewees, the sources of funding represent a sensitive issue. According to one of them, “our sources of funds raise suspicions about my organisation, every time we conduct a survey, or undertake an action, there are always allegations that we are sponsored by socially undesirable donors” (I 30, Executive Director; Citizenship Organisation).

Accordingly, three important aspects related to the foreign funding sources can be identified. First, NPOs lack the necessary negotiation competencies of these funds, which may expose them to donors' opportunistic behaviour and interference in the organisations' decision making and activities. Second, the excessive dependence on specific donors, which could be harmful to the NPOs' objectives fulfilment and damaging for its relatedness to people's expectations and claims; and third, suspicious funding weaken their position vis-à-vis their donors and public, and cause mission creep. For Kéfi (2015), dubious foreign donors, particularly those funding certain political parties and radical groups, represent a major challenge even for the success of the democratic transition in Tunisia.

*The media.* According to our interviewees (2 out of 32), the media also influence NPOs image and reputation with their over emphasis on critical incidents and experiences and

generalising them to the not for profit sector “*the Media contributed to the spreading of a negative image of NPOs, as many organisations were accused to be involved in terrorism funding. So, when you talk about NPOs to a Tunisian citizen, what first comes to his/her mind, is terrorism*” (I 2, Employee; Economic Development Organisation).

This finding supports previous authors’ claims about the negative role of media in emphasising and generalising negative news concerning NPOs to the whole not for profit sector which could damage the NPOs’ credibility (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014; Driscoll, 2017).

To overcome these drawbacks, NPOs should adopt a more proactive approach in dealing with their actors’ ecosystem and in handling incidents that might tarnish their brand image. In this line, Bruce *et al.* (2018) suggest using public relations to ensure the NPOs trustworthiness and to adopt a marketing strategy to manage their brand image and reputation. We propose to go further by using new tools of competitive intelligence to be alert and to be responsive.

Whilst the economic crisis and the foreign funding sources seem to critically influence the credibility and survival of the NPOs, public generalisation of some NPOs unethical practices -and the resulting phenomenon of transfer - appears to be a critical threat to NPOs. To some extent, such a phenomenon seems to be relayed by the media by focusing only on the negative news concerning NPOs.

This study contribute to existing literature by offering new insight as to the controversial role of the foreign funding sources in the difficult context of Tunisian NPOs. Though needed, foreign donors constitute a source of dilemmas for NPOs. These later are characterised by their vulnerability and fragile equilibrium. Foreign donors add to this fragility and expose NPOs to more challenges that could jeopardise their survival, compromise their objectives fulfilment and cause their mission creep. Also, NPOs could lose their relatedness to people's expectations and claims as a result their excessive dependence on specific donors and lack of negotiation competencies.

## **Conclusion**

### *Theoretical and practical Implications*

This study aimed to identify the factors that inhibit NPOs activities and compromise their survival. It also attempts to map the factors leading to NPOs’ downfall especially in a crisis context. The content analysis revealed two categories of inhibitors. First, endogenous

inhibitors including: i) inhibitors under the control of the NPO: use of illegal and foreign sources of funding, limited financial resources, unavailability of NPOs' members, short term planning, conflicts between managers, autocratic leadership, organisational support, activities diversification and organisational justice, leadership and communication skills, "*NPO culture*", members' opportunistic behaviour and, generation gap; and, ii) inhibitors related to NPOs inter-relationships: stiff competition, unfair and dishonest competition, lack of collaboration, trust and communication between NPOs. Second, exogenous inhibitors, which include: perceived unethical practices and image transfer, economic crisis, foreign funding sources and the media.

The study findings present several theoretical contributions. Indeed, they contribute to distinguish and delineate two categories of endogenous inhibitors to the NPO, those under the control of NPO and those related to the interrelationship between NPOs. The findings also contribute to better grasp these inhibitors by uncovering new factors behind NPOs depletion and that threaten their survival.

At the organisational level, NPOs survival is hindered by factors such as the conflicts between the board of director members, the lack congruence between the NPOs' mission, announced objectives and their activities, the leadership style, the perception of organisation justice, the absence of an "*NPO culture*" grounded in Tunisia' political history characterised by the authoritarian previous regime, members' opportunistic behaviour, the generation gap.

As to the NPOs inter-relationship level, the study also revealed some interesting factors related to the meso environment where NPOs may resort to business-like practices not only at the micro level (organisational structures and processes) as observed by Maier et al., (2016) but paradoxically, NPOs may adopt unethical competition practices in contradiction with the altruistic values that NPOs are expected to endorse (Gibelman and Gelman, 2004).

Such findings are even more important as they pertain to a crisis context. Indeed, Tunisia has been witnessing political and social changes since the 2011 Arab Spring events accompanied with a large mobilisation of the civil society (via NPOs) to take part in the nascent democracy. This country is still experiencing a multi-level crisis e.g. political, economic, social, security (Klaas and Dirsus, 2019) leading to a muddled landscape where a wide range of local and foreign actors attempt to fulfill divergent interests at the expense of the country's stability, growth, and Tunisian citizens' claims for dignity, employment and freedom (Fortier, 2019). Meanwhile, as the priorities of the government are elsewhere -fighting terrorism,

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unemployment, social crisis, elections, debt management- (Klaas and Dirsus, 2019, Letsch, 2018; Warkotsch, 2017) NPOs, which are mostly newly created, are left to the vagaries of the local and foreign donors, but also are compelled to compete in an aggressive way between each other for funds and for survival. We contend that this is the reason why NPOs, in a crisis context, may behave in such a manner and adopt unethical competitive practices deliberately or un-deliberately even if there is a risk of losing their positioning, reputation, public and stakeholders trust and a likelihood of disappointing their initially targeted community.

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Furthermore, the study findings pointed to the importance of exogenous factors, which need to be taken into account to better understand the complexity of the exchange system where NPOs operate. This exchange system encompasses many challenges that threaten the continuity of the NPO. Particularly, the study results contribute to shed light on the negative consequences of NPOs short-term vision in their consent to be funded by doubtful donors. This type of exchange could be extremely harmful for the NPOs' mission, image and reputation. Indeed, as rewards from NPOs actions (directly welfare for others and indirectly for the NPOs, their members and/or relatives) are intended to have a long term span, any deviance from the NPOs project and mission will be highly disappointing for their members and targeted communities. It may also trigger negative generalisations to the entire NPOs sector relayed by media and public, which engender via a mechanism of image transfer, stakeholders and public disenchantment and distrust.

The findings reveal the extent to which NPOs are vulnerable, particularly in a crisis context. Actually, they seem to be evolving in a complex network of relationships where different types of exchanges occur between and/or inter NPOs, members, target communities, for profit organisations, governments, media, legal and political institutions, national and international donors. These relationships entail several paradoxes. Indeed, their survival relies on the will of donors, meanwhile, they should be very careful as to the origin of the sources of funding as well as the short and long term interests of their donors (Moeller and Valentinov, 2012); they depend on the volunteers' engagement, while these volunteers need to be supported, fairly rewarded and retained. This appears to be not an easy task, as the for profit sector is still more attractive (Kim and Charbonneau, 2020). Besides, they have to comply with the new accountability and governance requirements, but still lack the necessary skills and the required level of professionalisation/institutionalisation. They need to negotiate with donors or find alternative forms of collaboration, while they lack cultural competences;



they rely on lowly paid volunteers, and have difficulties to guarantee a minimum of funding to avoid the drawbacks of financial dependency.

Such paradoxical situations point to a certain analogy with Bagozzi's (1975; 2011) reasoning as to the complex circular exchange involving "an interconnected web of relationships" (Bagozzi, 1975; p.33) and where "each exchange partner (*is*) linked reciprocally to two others, adjacent to the partner, such that the pattern of relationships is continuous or in a circular pattern:  $A \leftrightarrow B \leftrightarrow C \leftrightarrow A$ " (Bagozzi, 2011; p.4). In his seminal think piece Bagozzi (1974) argued that such a system represents a set of social actors, their mutual relationships and the endogenous and exogenous factors affecting the behaviour of the social actors in those relationships. The author encouraged scholars "to conceive exchange behaviour as being embedded in a complex system of facilitators and inhibitors with some under control of the parties and some part of the social fabric" Bagozzi (1994, p.156).

We consider that our results are consistent with this conceptualisation of marketing exchange system and explicitly extend it to the not for profit sector. We argue that NPOs are social exchange actors whose behaviour is "being embedded in a complex system of facilitators and inhibitors with some under control of the parties and some part of the social fabric ..." and contend that Bagozzi's framework is appropriate as it provides a comprehensive and holistic representation of the complex system of exchange in between NPOs and between NPOs and their stakeholders e.g. members, other NPOs, government, national and international private donors, beneficiaries. As such, we contributed to delineate the endogenous factors inhibiting the NPOs activities and survival -by distinguishing between inhibitors under the control of the NPO and so could be managed by them and the inhibitors related to the NPOs' inter-relationships that are more critical to manage – and to pinpoint the exogenous factors constraining their existence in a crisis context and which could be considered as inhibitors pertaining to the social fabric.

From a practical perspective, identifying the factors behind the depletion of NPOs activities could help NPOs in developing appropriate strategies to manage the factors on which they have certain control upon and those stemming from the social fabric which are out of their control of NPOs.

Our findings emphasise the critical effect of the inhibitors under the NPOs control compared to those out of their control. Given the context characteristics, we think these results are logical in so far they reflect the interviewees experience and interpretations of certain reality

pertaining to a sector undergoing a major transition in terms of size, types, regulations, state weakness, political changes and historical and geopolitical challenges, but also lacking maturity.

Besides, since the major part of inhibitors is under the control of NPOs, we think that this is rather reassuring as Tunisian NPOs could tackle these issues by ensuring congruence between the NPOs' mission, objectives and activities and by designing suitable strategies, i.e. marketing strategies, internal marketing, public relations, branding, reputation and e-reputation, competitive intelligence tools.

Besides, our findings could be of great interest to the policy makers by outlining the reasons behind some NPOs wrongdoing such as resorting to suspicious donors, money laundering activities, etc. For instance, the government should review NPOs' regulation; implement online platforms for allow more flexibility for NPOs taxes' declaration and enhance their accountability. Moreover, the government has to increase public awareness about the value of voluntary activities and support the NPOs ecosystem. This could be fulfilled through coaching and training programmes, by developing champion programs, such as those used in the for profit sector to praise the best NPO, for example. Such programs may be also adopted by NPOs to enhance their volunteers' retention.

#### *Limitations and future research avenues*

In spite of the importance of the study results, some limitations are to be addressed. First, data collection was undertaken in only two regions (Tunis and Sousse). Thus, the results may lack generalizability. Other studies may take into account other NPOs based in other regions and countries in crisis. Second, the study findings revealed the importance of NPOs' inter-relationships in shaping their sustainability. Hence, we reiterate calls to study the factors and conditions promoting NPOs collaborations (collaborations involving NPOs that share some mutual goal) as suggested by Gazley and Guo (2015).

Third, it would be interesting to address NPOs issues from other perspectives such as funders, companies or even the public authority institutions and decision makers ones. This will allow uncovering other processes and dynamics inherent to circular exchange system where NPOs activities are embedded (Bagozzi, 1975). For example, studying the media's role, e.g. social network sites, in communicating with their stakeholders, developing a positive e-WOM and even fast-tracking wrongdoing among NPOs, etc. A second interesting avenue is to further study the impact of image transfer that goes beyond of the NPO involved in the misconduct,

to reach others in the sector and may disrupt the fragile equilibrium of the not for profit sector particularly in crisis context.

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