Session II: Inspiring practices from the Mediterranean

OASIS ECOSYSTEMS AND LIVELIHOODS PROJECT IN TUNISIA

Presentation by Angelo BONFIGLIOLI, Environment & Community Development Consultant, World Bank
The Tunisia’ Oasis Ecosystems and Livelihoods Project (TOELP) is one of a new generation of projects financed by the World Bank and the GEF which, in Tunisia as in neighboring countries (like Morocco), have aimed at combining environmental protection with social and economic development.

This 5-year project started in 2014 and was closed in December 2019.

In spite of its relatively limited funds (a little more than 5 million US$) and geographical scope (six selected locations in four governorates), the project was extremely successful and contributed to addressing local environmental and socio-economic challenges.

Tunisia has a population of about 12 million people, with an area of about 162,000 km². In Tunisia, oases cover only about 42,000 ha of the total country area but are home to about 950,000 people (10 percent of the Tunisian population).
GENERAL CONTEXT
Tunisia's historic oases are not only morphologically well-defined natural formations, *sites of exceptional biodiversity and habitats* for animal and plant species.

They are also, and above all, *historical sites* with very specific identities, natural and cultural heritage, the result of *intergenerational interactions between humans and nature*.

In southern Tunisia, oases have always played and still play an important role in *food security*: they are the main *source of employment*, providing a variety of agricultural products and by-products, pasture and fodder for livestock, water, fuel, handicraft and building material.

In the last decades, oasis ecosystems have also been facing numerous *environmental threats, which undermine their viability*: land degradation, overexploitation of water resources, soil salinization, soil erosion and loss of fertility, loss of biodiversity, chaotic urbanization, invasion of land and habitat by sand; etc.
Oasis livelihoods are also dramatically threatened by numerous socio-economic problems:

- **Regional disparities.** In Tunisia, social and economic disparities between coastal / urban areas and the interior and southern regions (where most oases are located) are *a fundamental driver* of social, economic and cultural problems.

- **Unemployment.** In all rural areas in Tunisia, more than 34% of young people are affected by unemployment. One in three young men in rural Tunisia (33.4 percent) are not in education, employment, or training.

- **Youth migration.** High rates of youth migration deprives oasis areas of their limited skilled young labor force. Young Tunisians, who see themselves as victims of neglect and regional bias, migrate not only for work but also to exit from all kinds of social pressure in their rural communities, creating additional frustrations.

- **Gender barriers.** In Tunisia, gender exclusion remains a daunting challenge for young women trying to enter the workforce. Equal access to economic opportunities is limited by gender barriers. Less than one in five women in rural Tunisia (18.5 percent) has a job.
In a limited number of oases selected according to specific social, economic and geographic parameters, the Project set up an innovative and pilot experience.

The main objective was to empower local actors, create jobs and reduce regional disparities and inequalities between men and women and thereby contribute to poverty reduction.

The challenges faced by the Project were considerable, particularly in terms of the limited capacities and lack of leadership of grass-roots institutions, numerous gender gaps and vulnerability to climate change.

The Project adopted a step-by-step learning process:

- Firstly, it supported a participatory and inclusive planning process aimed at the elaboration of a comprehensive Local Development Plan in each of the six targeted oases.

- Secondly, it provided financial support to specific eligible microprojects identified and implemented by local civil society organizations, agricultural development groups, women’s groups, youth associations and small and medium enterprises. Agricultural equipment and funds (as grants or matching grants) were given to the promoters of these microprojects.
SUPPORTING LOCAL MICROPROMOJECTS
In the area of **sustainable land and water management (SLWM)**, the project provided financial support to 59 microprojects, namely:

- Equipment of six boreholes in motor pumps,
- Creation of 2,738 linear meters of new water channels and rehabilitation of about 500 linear meters m of existing water channels,
- Construction of an irrigation water storage basin (550 m³)
- Creation of fences for the protection of crops against the ravages of wild boars (for the benefit of 559 farmers).
- Installation of composting units,
- Different measures of restoration and protection of biodiversity (through biological control)
- Production, multiplication and distribution of more than 150 cultivars adapted to local conditions,
- Planting of more than 14,000 fruit trees, and of 30,000 olive trees,
- Protection of about 3,800 aromatic and medicinal plants
- Construction of a photovoltaic station (pumping irrigation water).
- Cleaning of more than 400 hectares of oasis, and 6 linear km of drains,
- Etc.
In the area of *diversification of local livelihoods*, the project supported 60 micro-projects aimed at improving the resilience of young women and men in different areas, such as:

- **Income-generating activities**, by supporting traditional sewing and carpet weaving, beekeeping, and poultry farming
• **Ecotourism**, including beautification of villages and restoration of historical buildings, creation of ecolodges and of recreational tourist circuits

• **Cultural events**, including the organization of cultural and sports festivals and support for Youth Houses (folkloric horse raiding and traditional music events).
KEY OUTCOMES
The Project contributed to reducing poverty and sharing prosperity in particularly vulnerable communities and fragile ecosystems.

It provided communities with opportunities to increase the productivity of their lands, to raise agricultural yields and incomes, to improve their livelihoods and to identify alternative livelihoods.

The Project aimed to facilitate, coordinate, mobilize and stimulate participatory actions by putting beneficiaries in the driving seat.

The Project focused on collective activities promoted by groups of young women and men.

- It invested in local social capital, by strengthening solidarity networks, self-help organizations, mutual trust, mutual benefit, and resilience.

- It focused on human capital, by supporting capacity building initiatives for young women and men to improve their technical and administrative skills.
Overall, the Project supported 119 community-based microprojects, which benefitted a total of 4,100 households (i.e., about 18,000 people).

A total of 1,750 jobs was created, generating significant income at the level of poor households.

A total of 185 micro and small enterprises (MSMEs) were created, assisted or supported and capacity-building initiatives were organized for their members.
CONCLUSION
Project activities underlined the *nexus* existing between environment protection and socio-economic development.

The project emphasized *the parallel benefits* of activities aimed at:

- On one hand, combatting poverty, improving socio-economic resilience to external crises, improving local conditions, supporting alternative livelihoods, creating jobs and generating income,

- And, on the other hand, at rehabilitating ecosystems and their services, reducing human pressure on fragile natural resources and protecting biodiversity.

The combination of adaptation measures for the resilience of the oasis, economic subproject for the resilience of people (both hard investments), and capacity building activities (soft investment) has guided the **design of a much larger and more ambitious World Bank project** (the so called “**Waha Project**”), which is due to start in 2021 and will cover all the 126 historical oasis landscapes in Southern Tunisia.
TO KNOW MORE
Those who are interested to know more about the situation of young women and men in Tunisia could read a report prepared in 2014 by the World Bank (available online):

Those who would like to know more about the Project’s activities could visit its website: [http://www.oasys.tn/](http://www.oasys.tn/)

A video presenting the project (in French with English sub-titles) is also available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1cPIRD-2Ko&t=388s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1cPIRD-2Ko&t=388s)