

Revitalizing Public Decision-Support Institutions in Tunisia

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Policy Brief

Public analysis and decision-support institutions play a central role in shaping public policy. While Tunisia benefits from relatively robust institutions and skilled personnel, its institutional framework has gradually weakened, and certain functions are no longer being performed as effectively as they once were. This policy brief draws on a 2024 study of the institutional organization of Tunisia's public entities supporting economic decision-making, conducted at the request of the Ministry of Economy and Planning. It proposes three complementary areas for improvement: enhancing institutional coordination through high-level strategic steering; fostering a culture of quality, particularly through the systematic evaluation of outputs; and facilitating engagement with academia and other knowledge-producing actors.

1 Introduction

Over the past thirty years, the Tunisian economy has increasingly fallen behind its development trajectory^[1] (Figure 1). Today, Tunisia's GDP per capita is less than 40% of the average for upper-middle-income countries – a group that includes Botswana, Guatemala, Malaysia, and Thailand.

One reason often advanced to explain the slowdown of Tunisia's economy is the restrictive nature of the regulatory framework (limited competition, barriers to entry, capital controls), which hinders the possibilities of social mobility. To break out of this economic deadlock, Tunisia urgently needs economic analyses that are both in-depth and grounded in real-world conditions to inform public policymaking. Tunisia is not alone in this regard: as the World Bank has noted, middle-income countries often struggle to adapt their analytical capacities to the growing complexity of their economic structures, so much so that they suffer from a greater information deficit than low-income economies (simpler) and advanced economies (better equipped)^[2].

To address this lack of data and analysis, it is essential that local knowledge-producing actors take the lead. Replicating policy recommendations from the Washington Consensus, even in revised form, yet without taking the local context into account is not a viable solution. The experiences of countries such as China, South Korea, India, and Taiwan show that unconventional reform programs that are tailored to a country's particular economic, social, and political situation can yield significant results^[3].

[1] World Bank, Tunisia Economic Monitor: Equity and Efficiency of Tunisia Tax System – Fall 2024 (2024).

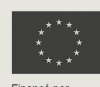
[2] World Bank, World Development Report 2024: The Middle-Income Trap (2024).

[3] Dani Rodrik, "Growth Strategies." A paper for the Handbook of Economic Growth, revised October 2004.

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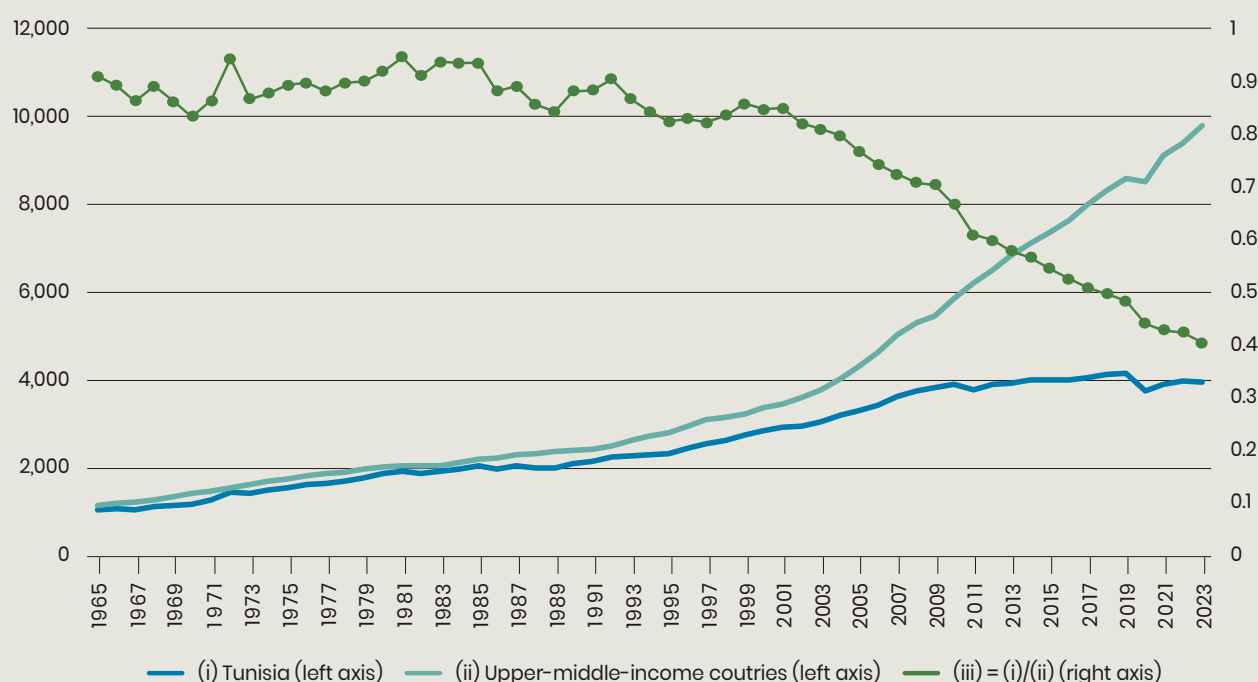
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Figure 1 – Since 2000, Tunisia's economy has fallen behind that of upper-middle-income countries

Comparison of GDP per capita for Tunisia (i) and upper-middle-income countries (ii) from 1965 to 2023 (in constant 2015 USD) and ratio of the 2 components (iii) = (i)/(ii)



Source: World Development Indicators. Authors' calculations.

Accordingly, the production of knowledge and analyses by public institutions for analysis and decision-support is a crucial factor in the success of development strategies and public policies. This policy brief provides a broad overview of the institutional organization of Tunisia's public economic decision-support entities and makes recommendations to strengthen the links between the ecosystem of analysis producers and policymakers.

2 An inefficient institutional ecosystem

As in many countries, several institutions in Tunisia are tasked with informing economic policymaking. These institutions are expected to perform four essential functions: **measuring**, by producing reliable and up-to-date statistics; **analyzing**, by conducting in-depth studies tailored to the Tunisian context; **proposing**, by formulating relevant policy recommendations and economic strategies; and **disseminating**, by sharing this knowledge to enhance public debate and guide decision-making.

Several entities are foundational to Tunisia's institutional ecosystem, including the **Ministry of Economy and Planning (MEP)** and its Direction Générale des Prévisions (General Directorate of Forecasting), which play a central role in shaping national economic planning and forecasting the country's economic outlook. The MEP, whose responsibilities include preparing five-year development plans and annual economic budgets, also commissions economic studies and leads the design and coordination of the national development strategy. The MEP's current transformation plan, for 2023–2025, seeks to reposition the ministry as the leading body for strategic thinking on economic and social reform. As part of this strategy, the MEP is also working to revitalize two institutions under its supervision: the ITCEQ and the INS.

As the central body of Tunisia's national statistical system, the **Institut National de la Statistique (INS) (National Institute of Statistics)** plays a fundamental role in the production and dissemination of data. Currently, however, it lacks the capacity to meet the growing needs of policymakers and researchers.

The INS is experiencing severe brain drain, particularly due to the departure of a significant number of statistical engineers abroad. This loss of qualified human resources has created an imbalance in the management of its various statistical departments and significantly reduced the institute's capacity to produce data and analysis. While the total number of permanent staff doubled between 2010 and 2023, the number of statistical engineers was halved.

Modernizing the INS is now a major challenge. While many countries are adopting models that integrate big data, artificial intelligence, and advanced predictive analytics, the INS struggles to update its data processing and analysis tools. This technological lag, coupled with the shortage of skilled personnel, undermines the relevance of its analyses and slows public decision-making processes.

In addition, Tunisia's statistical governance is fragmented and poorly coordinated. On the one hand, the Conseil National de la Statistique (CNS) (National Council of Statistics) lacks the resources to effectively oversee and regulate statistical production; on the other hand, the country's 47 Structures Statistiques Publiques (SSPs) (Public Statistical Agencies), which are housed within various ministries and public bodies, sometimes apply differing methodologies – compromising data comparability and making it difficult for policymakers and researchers to use the data effectively. These structural

dysfunctions delay the publication of data, reduce the effectiveness of surveys, and weaken the planning and evaluation of public policies.

Although the **Institut Tunisien de la Compétitivité et des Études Quantitatives (ITCEQ) (Tunisian Institute for Competitiveness and Quantitative Studies)** has long served as a key instrument for economic analysis and decision-support, it currently faces challenges in fulfilling this role. While its status as an *Établissement Public à Caractère Non Administratif* (EPNA) (Non-Administrative Public Establishment) offers a certain level of autonomy, it also limits how flexible the ITCEQ can be in managing human resources and partnerships, particularly those with academic institutions. As a result, the institute struggles to attract and retain qualified talent, particularly in the fields of quantitative economics and economic forecasting.

Moreover, the creation of observatories and of research and planning departments within a number of ministries has gradually curtailed demand for the ITCEQ's expertise. This trend raises concerns about institutional coherence, as it has led to a fragmentation of economic analysis capacities in the public sector, eroding the overall efficiency of these capacities, while the rationale for creating these new entities has not always been clear.

3 Obstacles limiting the efficiency of the current institutional system

A number of limitations hinder the efficiency of the ecosystem of public entities for economic decision-support assistance in Tunisia.

Although the country has well-regarded institutions and expertise, its **economic and statistical culture** is underdeveloped. Public debate on economic issues is limited, both in the media and among the general public. Even within the administration, interest in economic analysis appears to have waned, as reflected by the declining number of requests made to ITCEQ by other ministries. This stands in contrast to the situation in Morocco, where the Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) (High Commission for Planning) plays a central role in public debate, or in France, where the work of institutions such as France Stratégie and the Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE) (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) is regularly referenced and discussed in the media.

Tunisia's institutional ecosystem also lacks **coherence**. There are a number of redundancies, with multiple institutions working on the same topics without meaningful coordination. For instance, both the Centre de Recherches et d'Études Sociales (CRES) (Center for Research and Social Studies) and the ITCEQ conduct social studies, while short-term economic analyses are produced by the Central Bank of Tunisia, the MEP, and the Ministry of Finance. At the same time, topics such as debt sustainability, state-owned enterprise reform, and subsidy analysis remain insufficiently addressed. This situation is all the more problematic given Tunisia's limited resources.

Institutional coordination appears to be insufficient. Although staff from different entities share information informally, the institutions themselves do not interact to any significant degree. Collaboration is rare, methodological dialogue minimal, and the planning of research activities uncoordinated.

Internal governance issues are another major obstacle. Management practices, often inherited from a rigid administrative framework, are poorly suited to institutions whose activities rely on expertise and research capabilities (as opposed to support functions). The inflexibility of regulations and the difficulty of engaging external expertise further limit the effectiveness of these institutions.

Beyond the decline in the attractiveness in public institutions, opportunities for **professional mobility** remain excessively limited. Movement between institutions and, in particular, between these institutions and the academic sector, are still too rare, even on a temporary basis. This stagnation is detrimental to staff motivation, skill development, and the sharing of best practices.

Finally, a **culture of quality** has yet to be established. Key practices such as peer review, publication in external outlets, and regular evaluation of work are not sufficiently developed.

4 Ideas and proposals for improving the existing organizational framework

In light of these findings, three priority areas for improvement stand out.

The first priority is to coordinate the work of Tunisia's public institutions around **a common strategy**. This begins with developing a clear and coherent strategic framework for the production of economic knowledge. The MEP would be the most appropriate institution to lead this coordination effort, drawing on a modernization of the planning process that could benefit from greater flexibility and responsiveness. The example of Morocco's HCP, which combines strategic vision with operational agility, could serve as a model.

This coordination should be institutionalized – for example, through the creation of a steering committee made up of key stakeholders. Regular forums for exchange should also be established, such as a joint annual conference or a recurring economic policy seminar. Particular attention should be paid to the special relationship between the ITCEQ and the INS, as their potential synergies are clear but remain largely underexploited.

The second area of focus concerns improving institutional **governance**. A key step is to restore their attractiveness, notably by increasing compensation for qualified staff and promoting professional mobility. The culture of quality must also be strengthened, through greater emphasis on evaluation, the promotion of publications, and a better framework for monitoring performance. Ex post evaluation of public policies should be further developed, drawing inspiration from the UK's What Works Centres model.

The third area aims to identify opportunities for **development** in Tunisia's constrained fiscal environment. Collaboration with the academic sector could be reinforced, following the example of Germany, where major economic institutes maintain close ties with universities. Such collaboration can take a variety of forms, such as joint research projects, shared positions, or co-funded doctoral programs. New funding channels could also be explored, such as developing regulated commercial activities or enhancing international collaboration. Finally, rationalizing the use of public resources might involve restructuring certain institutions, particularly among the SSPs, whose numbers appear excessive.

Of these three areas, **institutional coordination stands out as the most urgent priority**. Given Tunisia's resource constraints, improving the ecosystem's overall coherence offers the fastest and most significant prospects for

efficiency gains. The experience of Tunisia's Conseil d'Analyses Économiques (Council for Economic Analysis) between 2016 and 2019 shows that effective coordination can yield quick results: during this period, monthly meetings with the head of government provided a dynamic forum for presenting and discussing work that was highly relevant to the executive's priorities. Reviving and fortifying such a coordination mechanism could be a first step in improving the current system.

Making these improvements is all the more critical given that Tunisia needs effective institutions to clarify its economic policymaking and foster informed public debate. Implementing these changes will require sustained effort, but it is precisely because the country's resources are limited that coherence and efficiency are vital.

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