SUMMARY

TUNISIA
COUNTRY REPORT ON OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN

OCTOBER 2014
Introduction

Achieving universal education has been a priority for the Tunisian government since gaining independence. As a result, since 1958, successive education system reforms have laid the foundations for integrated education that is free and compulsory from 6 to 16 years old. From the mid-1990s, the already well-established goal of universal access to education was coupled with the objective of improving its quality. With the aim of making the Tunisian education system more effective, inclusive and equitable, specific objectives were set, including restoring meaning to education and making students more active in educational development, as well as equipping teachers to deal with the weakest students. Several policy-related reforms have been implemented, including the 2002 law that made the pre-primary year universal in the public sector and introduced support programmes for children with difficulties at school (PASS, PEP, ISEH, etc.).

These decades of development in the Tunisian education sector make up the current educational ‘map’. In 2013, the net rate of enrolment of children aged 6 was 99.4 per cent (equally split between girls and boys) and that of children aged 6 to 11 was 98.9 per cent. This almost universal coverage has already existed for a decade. In addition, the student-teacher ratio has decreased to reach today’s level of 17.2. For secondary school and college the situation is less positive. Over the last 10 years, the enrolment rate of young people aged 12 to 18 has come to a halt at around 75 per cent. Secondary schools and colleges blame the high grade repetition rate, which, in 2011-2012 was 10 points higher than that of the primary school repetition rate (17.3 per cent at secondary school and 16.8 per cent at college compared with 7.5 per cent at primary school). The dropout rate is also significantly higher: 1 per cent at primary school compared to 9.3 per cent at secondary school and 11.9 per cent at college.

Although it is undergoing an unprecedented democratic transition, Tunisia faces several challenges (economic, political, social and religious) that could be either threats or opportunities for the country’s educational system. The result depends on whether or not the country makes the most of these changes to improve education for Tunisian children.

This study is investigating out-of-school children in order to help achieve the goal of improved education. It aims to determine the situation of children who are out of school or who risk becoming so. It also seeks to identify the socio-political and cultural factors that restrict access to education and seeks to propose a number of courses of action.
The study examines two aspects of education: the first is quantitative and calculates the number of children who are out of school or who risk becoming so at pre-school, primary school and secondary school. The second is qualitative and aims to identify the barriers and bottlenecks affecting school exclusion as well as identifying existing strategies to overcome them, and the limits of these strategies.

**Key trends of school exclusion in Tunisia**

From a methodological point of view, it is difficult to obtain reliable and coherent data from administrative sources, such as the National Institute of Statistics. This lack of accuracy means it is difficult to use administrative data to disaggregate figures by region, governorate, etc. MICS data from household surveys can help with this and enables cross referencing by gender, mother’s educational level and wealth quintile.

The table below highlights key data from the analysis of the Five Dimensions of Exclusion.

### The Five Dimensions of Exclusion in Tunisia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Out-of-school children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1: Children 5 years old</td>
<td>26,351</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>28,258</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>54,609</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pre-primary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2: Children 6 to 10 years old</td>
<td>6,070</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>8,963</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>15,033</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(primary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3: Children 11 to 14 years old</td>
<td>23,357</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>26,023</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>49,380</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(lower secondary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total out-of-school children</strong></td>
<td>55,779</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>63,244</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>119,022</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children at risk of dropping out of school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4: Children in primary school</td>
<td>11,026</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>16,012</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>27,038</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D5: Children in lower secondary school</td>
<td>17,471</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>37,584</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>55,055</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total children at risk of dropping out of school</strong></td>
<td>28,497</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>53,596</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>82,093</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 5D calculation from Ministry of Education, INS and author’s calculations.*

**What does this tell us?**

In 2006, one in two children was enrolled in a pre-primary school year. Things are heading in the right direction, as today, only one in three children does not complete a pre-primary year (the non-enrolment rate is 30.3 per cent or 54,609 children, of which 26,351 are girls), although some of the children not recorded as enrolled may follow another form of pre-school education. However, **access to pre-school education is still a problem for almost one in four children**. Furthermore, **access is not evenly distributed**, since a child enrolled in the first year of primary school is almost twice as likely to have completed a pre-school year if their mother attended higher education or if they are from a well-off family compared to a child whose mother has little or no education, or if the child comes from a poor family. Following on from this, there are significant differences in terms of access to pre-school between urban areas (9 out of 10 children) and rural areas (6 out of 10 children).

At different levels, as much for girls as for boys, there are a number of **early entrants** at pre-school, primary school and secondary school. On the other hand, relatively small numbers of students repeat school grades.
At primary school, enrolment is almost universal, regardless of the child’s profile. The number of primary out-of-school children is 15,033 (6,070 girls), or 1.5 per cent. From this low proportion of primary age out-of-school children, the majority re-join school later. In terms of primary school retention, figures are encouraging: in 2012 the number of children who had dropped out was three times less than in 2000 (dropping from 9 to 3 per cent). However, this decrease has occurred at the expense of quality, where students may still reach the sixth year of basic education without having acquired basic skills.

This explains why dropping out occurs more at secondary school, and although figures have decreased over the last 12 years, the rate is still two times higher than at primary school level. This raises the question about the transition between the two cycles.

There is also a relatively large dropout rate among children with disabilities over the years of schooling. From primary school to secondary school, their numbers decrease to almost two thirds and only one quarter attend college.

The issue of gender is significant among those who leave school in college and has increased over the years to become twice as high for boys than for girls. Socio-economic variables also play a part. Cohort studies show that difficulties at school are linked to socio-economic status, which is also the subject of significant regional disparity in Tunisia. The MICS4 study (2012) highlighted large regional disparities in the centre-west governorates, which have the lowest school enrolment rates.

There are more out-of-school children aged 12 to 14 than at primary school age: just over one in ten secondary school-aged children (or a total of 49,380, of which 23,357 are girls) does not attend school for this second cycle of basic education. This figure is mostly made up of children who have previously dropped out of school, which means that children who have left school are the biggest problem facing secondary schools. From 12 to 18 years, the probability of being outside the school system increases with age. However, MICS4 data show that children and young people who are classed as being out of school can enrol in vocational training (this is not part of the Ministry of Education). The out of school category therefore covers a variety of situations including children enrolled in parallel education systems, children following vocational training, children involved in child labour, expatriate children etc.

With regard to the problem of child labour, MICS4 highlights the fact that 2.6 per cent of children aged 5 to 14 are involved in child labour and these children are mainly aged 5 to 11. Out-of-school children are more likely to work than children who are at school, with a significant difference among those aged 12 to 14 (10 per cent against 0.5 per cent).

Children living in rural areas are more likely to work, whether they are at school or not, than children from urban areas. There are also differences between the sexes. Among children at school, boys are twice as likely to work as girls, while among out-of-school children the situation is reversed.

How can we explain this situation, what are the key driving forces and if there is a need for action, where should we start? The second part of this study highlights the different bottlenecks in the Tunisian system as well as discussing the different strategies that have been adopted over the years. This analysis ends with several findings and recommendations, summarized as follows:

I) Massive investment is required at pre-school level for infrastructure, unifying and standardizing programmes and training educators. The Tunisian education system has weak pre-school provision which hinders children’s development and affects the efficacy of primary education.
Although the coverage rate has increased since 2006, when half of all children did not receive any form of pre-school education before the age of 6, one in four children still do not benefit from pre-school access and one in three doesn’t attend a pre-school year before entering the primary school cycle. The issue of pre-school access becomes more acute in rural areas. This trend must be countered by making pre-school compulsory and free, as part of a general policy, i.e. a policy which is not limited to the pre-school year but which also covers pre-school education for children aged 3 and 4. These years preceding primary education are crucial for children’s development, helping to form children’s personalities, contributing to their later school successes and also for early identification of any physical or mental issues that may limit their chances of educational success.

Although the ministries in charge of childhood and education should play a decisive role in driving pre-primary education forward and creating the necessary frameworks, their implementation should involve all relevant regional and local stakeholders, associations and private organisations. Local levels have a key role to play, as they are better able to apply such initiatives to their local contexts. The role of local authorities in managing children’s nurseries should be reactivated. The private sector should also become a strategic partner by receiving financial incentives for investment in the poorest regions. In terms of demand, awareness campaigns should be led among parents who do not see the value of sending their child to a pre-school, particularly in rural areas.

Based on this information, the following specific recommendations are made:

- Immediately make pre-school compulsory and free. It is unacceptable that in today's Tunisia so many children aged 5 are not yet in education.
- As part of a national pre-school strategy, renew willingness to make pre-school universal, under the impetus of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Childhood, with the following conditions: plan the universality of a pre-school year as part of a general pre-school policy that also includes children aged 3 and 4, and not just one pre-school year; consider quantity and quality together since it is unthinkable to make pre-school universal if it is of low quality; and place more emphasis on rural regions.
- Utilize all stakeholders at the local level, particularly the local authorities.

II) The quality of the Tunisian education system (including the quality of provision) remains very much a live issue. Quality should be improved at all levels, starting with pre-school and prioritizing the transition between primary and secondary in particular.

II.1) The first barrier to improving quality of education is that of teacher training. Currently, Tunisia does not have a comprehensive training centre for the education professions. It is vital that an ambitious teacher training policy is drawn up which clearly sets out the expected competencies of teachers and educators at each level. Recruitment criteria for teachers should also be revised. The job of teaching is not something that can be improvised and it requires specific pedagogical skills. The current balance between qualifications (enhancing the teaching profession by requiring a degree) and teaching competencies/skills (carrying out the actual job of teaching) is disproportionate and should be rethought to improve the latter.

II.2) The second challenge is creating the resources to provide a child-centred education. The reform introduced in the middle of the 1990s, which called for a skills-based approach, indicated a willingness to improve the education system in terms of increasing efficacy, quality and equity. This reform was very important but it did not have the resources to realize its ambitions, particularly for each educational cycle to focus on remedial sessions and assessment – formative then certificational – to help evaluate whether students had acquired the necessary skills. Emphasis should not be placed on redeploying a school-grade repeating policy: that would be missing the point. It would
be better to focus on developing an evaluation and grading system for student achievement, based on tackling complex and concrete situations and which encourages use of resources in the students’ best interests. Such an evaluation system assumes that complex situations will already have been worked on with the students in class. Remedial classes should also be improved to support those students experiencing difficulties.

II.3) The third challenge is that of revising and standardizing school programmes. Each different school level must communicate in order to create coherence between the programmes. The relatively fragmented administrative framework must be overcome by a leadership group that will supervise programme revisions (literary subjects, humanities and social sciences etc.) and ensure continuity between the different educational cycles.

II.4) The fourth challenge exists more locally and is the quality of school life within each establishment. Following the 2004 Decree, educational provision should be improved by integrating socio-cultural, sporting and civic activities. The study on educational support recommends, for example, including homework, cultural and sporting activities within school time, linking them to education and defining them with reference to the target skills-base for each level. Developing cultural and sporting projects is also one of the actions to improve school life, so that students view it as positive and stimulating.

II.5) The fifth challenge is linked to the quality of provision. In Tunisia today, infrastructure and facilities vary considerably in terms of quality, sometimes even in terms of basic facilities (toilets, drinking water, paved roads etc.), which is unacceptable. The question of school transport is vital in rural regions and should be addressed by providing appropriate transport for each area, as in the example of the Ministry of Affairs for Women and Families (Ministère des Affaires de la Femme et de la Famille [MAFF]) partnership with a local authority to implement a free bus service for students going to school. The issue of school canteens should also be explored, as nutrition is vital for students’ well-being and concentration.

II.6) Technical/vocational education should also be reviewed and programmes should be enhanced by introducing an additional practical dimension to the existing theory. Young people should be given the option of alternating between work/school (work being a paid internship) to prepare them for the employment market while allowing them to pursue their education.

II.7) Across the board, for all future reforms, the backdrop should be that of rigorous and equitable quality standards. Equity means that the weakest students will be given more chances to develop rather than helping only the strongest to pass with flying colours.

• Addressing equity means paying particular attention to the most disadvantaged areas, in particular rural areas that have lower enrolment rates than urban areas. This is mostly the case for pre-school, secondary school and college. In other words, the idea of granting resources based on positive discrimination is acceptable as long as it is based on a prior needs analysis. This needs analysis is vital if resources are not to be wasted.

• Addressing equity also means paying specific attention to the vulnerable group of children with disabilities. For the past 10 years, Tunisia has been implementing an ambitious integration strategy that has, however, been shown to have numerous limitations including lack of specific training for staff, undeveloped structures that have led to a significant lack of resources etc. The new school inclusion plan for children with disabilities, currently under discussion, should focus largely on evaluating prior practices in integrated schools in order to avoid repeating previous mistakes. In particular, it is important to clarify what is meant by a ‘child with (mild) disabilities’. Whatever criteria are chosen, integrating children with disabilities is not an end in itself but is a means to helping them develop and grow.
Addressing equity must dispel the myth that a class or organization should be homogeneous. Far from promoting quality of education for all, grouping students by ability only intensifies differences between weak and strong students to the detriment of the former. Conversely, studies have shown that teaching heterogeneous (mixed-ability) classes is just as effective and is even more beneficial for weaker students. Mixed-ability classes also reduce student competition and aid student comprehension. If the school’s objective is, among others, to strengthen openness to universal civilisation, as stated in Article 3 of the general law of 2002, one might legitimately wonder if understanding – of the self, of others, of subjects being taught – might be being sacrificed in favour of meaningless success.

Based on this information, the following specific recommendations are made:

- **Initiate a ‘National programme to update educational infrastructure’** (PNMANIS – from the French). In 2014, Tunisian public schools should reflect a dignified image of the country’s children. Although there is a lot of potential in the idea of involving civil society groups, this cannot be a substitute for projects that are the responsibility of public authorities. It is suggested that within five years, all schools and colleges should fulfil Tunisian facilities standards. This will require: i) defining the standards; ii) a comprehensive infrastructure map; iii) elaborating a business plan for PNMANIS.

- **Carry out an in-depth review of the students’ learning outcomes evaluation system based on resolving complex situations and improving remedial classes.**

- **Rethink an ambitious teacher training policy and review recruitment criteria to favour teachers’ pedagogical skills in order to prepare for (and add value to) the complexity of the profession of teaching.**

- **Create coherence between different educational cycles by reforming and standardizing their content.**

- **Implement, in accordance with the 2004 Decree relating to school life, integration of homework, cultural and sporting activities within school time, linking them to education and defining them with reference to the target skills-base for each level. This should include consideration of how to amend the school day according to social and local parameters.**

- **Focus on school transport in rural areas and school canteens in disadvantaged areas.**

- **Renew the focus on technical and vocational education and consider work/study teaching methods.**

- **When establishing the revised School Inclusion Plan for children with disabilities, this should take the form of a real Integrated Care Plan for such children and clear objectives, well distributed responsibilities, performance indicators, follow up and accountability mechanisms. Reference should be made to evaluations of prior practice.**

- **All future reforms should be made against a backdrop of rigorous but equitable quality standards. Equity implies that special attention will be paid to certain regions. It also implies that the myth of homogeneous classes being more effective will be reviewed and where appropriate a pilot scheme of mixed ability, supported and well-equipped classes will be initiated.**

**III) Education sector governance should be subject to sensitive improvements in three ways:** 1) by strengthening the on-going decentralization process, 2) by consolidating horizontal collaboration between stakeholders at all levels; and 3) by improving resources to understand their own education system.

III.1 Creating regional commissions is a step forward in improving governance of the education system, and therefore its efficacy, but this process is not without difficulty. Considerable limits still exist with regard to regional skills development (such as the culture of strategic planning), budgets etc. These limits must be dealt with by **strengthening regional structures** so that they become more autonomous and can carry out specific educational projects within a national policy framework.
One of the strengths of the decentralization process is allocating resources to entities that operate more on a small scale (rather than a national scale). Therefore we recommend that newly created commissions explore possible partnerships with local associations for framework contracts related to specific objectives such as school transport and support for homework and cultural or sporting activities. Associations have expertise and local knowledge that can be exploited on a case-by-case basis as part of partnerships built around clear, planned and budgeted objectives. Locally implemented projects – especially integrated projects – will also maximize the chances of having an impact.

III.2) Coordination between stakeholders should be consolidated at all levels. At a centralized level, the diversity of ministerial leadership in several domains – pre-school, disability, rights of the child etc. – causes governance problems that have concrete repercussions on children’s progress. Locally, coordination between different stakeholders from different sectors (doctors, teachers, social workers, specialist teachers etc.) generally seems to fail within the existing structures for supporting children with difficulties. This is particularly relevant in the case of caring for children with disabilities, characterized by the sheer numbers of people involved. This multiplicity of stakeholders raises the question of how such child care can function, but also that of understanding it: parents don’t have a clear picture and often don’t know which organization to turn to, while stakeholders often don’t have a clear vision of their role or of the resources at their disposal. As a result, everyone’s responsibilities are diluted and lines are blurred, with no stakeholder really knowing where their role begins or ends.

III.3) Tunisia has a very advanced information collection and data production system. However this study has highlighted the fact that the country still has certain inadequacies in terms of resources for understanding its own education system at the level of studies, evaluation, data collection etc., and on subjects such as the quality of pre-school, transition between primary and secondary schools, child labour (see below), integrating children with disabilities etc. Therefore it may be recommended that, from now on, all statistical systems be made more coherent, within an integrated information system using a range of relevant indicators to make the education system leadership more effective (in particular for indicators on quality of teaching and student performance). A culture of strategic planning also needs to be developed, with resources dedicated to it, particularly in terms of implementing follow-up and evaluation mechanisms both locally and regionally.

From among these inadequacies, the specific problem of child labour has not been studied much in Tunisia. However this issue does exist and differs depending on area/region, gender and socio-economic status of the child’s family. The responses should therefore also be different depending on each case. We recommend that a more documented and precise analysis be carried out to fully understand the ins and outs of the issue. This is a pre-requisite for controlling this phenomenon, which Tunisia has committed to eradicate.

Based on this information, the following specific recommendations are made:

- Continue decentralization by granting necessary resources to regional education committees.
- Explore opportunities offered by collaborating with local stakeholders with a view to maximizing impact: local authorities, associations, private operators etc., and across different sectors, in particular for pre-school and care for children with disabilities and at-risk children.
- Increase information sharing and coordination at all levels so that the network set out on paper is effective in the field, used by practitioners and provides responses which are suitable for the children with difficulties. Where appropriate, review existing childhood care structures (education, social, justice etc.) with a view to streamlining them.
• Organize local and regional information sessions for teachers and families on the different structures that exist for students with disabilities (particularly for primary aged children).

• Increase coherence of all available statistics within an integrated information system that uses a range of relevant indicators in order to make the education system leadership more effective. Make this statistical system transparent. To this end, it is important to improve the EMIS (education management information system) and other data collection systems, and to periodically publish data on OOSC (out-of-school children).

• Develop a culture of strategic planning and dedicate resources to it, particularly in terms of implementing local and regional follow-up and evaluation mechanisms.

• As part of future research, (possibly in collaboration with the CNIPRE and universities) carry out a more documented and precise analysis of child labour in order to fully understand the ins and outs of the issue. This is a pre-requisite for controlling this phenomenon, which Tunisia has committed, nationally, to eradicate.