

# The Informal Economy in Tunisia: Current Situation, Challenges, and Stakes, Case of the City of Kasserine

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**Abstract** - This article is set in a controversial context marked by the dichotomy between formal (official) and informal (clandestine) activities. In the Tunisian case, the informal sector is of crucial importance, illustrated by revealing figures: nearly 40% of employment in the Tunisian private sector is active in the informal economy. Our research focuses on the city of Kasserine, where we analyze the role of the informal sector both economically and socially, while highlighting the impact of the social upheavals following the revolution. The issue underlying this study is based on the following paradox: the informal sector embodies both survival economy strategies and illegal activities that fall within the logic of economic crime. To address this issue, we have chosen a methodology based on three complementary sociological approaches: the semi-directive interview, the case study, and participant observation. These methods allow us to explore the social interactions and power structures that shape the informal sector, while taking into account the dynamics of solidarity and resilience that manifest within it..

**Keywords** - Informal Sector, Survival Economy, Economic Crime, Social Upheavals, Social Interactions, Resilience, Solidarity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Economic activities, and particularly trade exchanges, are rooted in human history while cultivating complex relationships with the sociological and cultural criteria of any given community. Similarly, trade has always had problematic relationships with official and public bodies that represent the State. This complexity is immediately reflected in the dichotomy between formal (or official) activities and informal (or clandestine) activities. In this context, the International Labor Organization defines the informal economy as the set of activities carried out by workers and economic entities that are legally or in practice not covered or insufficiently covered by formal mechanisms or measures. Their activities are not protected by legislation, which means that the law is not enforced or that the law discourages compliance due to its inadequacy, cumbersomeness, or excessive costs.

Consequently, the informal economy is distinguished by the extreme vulnerability and insecurity of its actors, whether they are self-employed workers or employers, due to the lack of protection, rights, and representation. Certainly, in many countries, the informal economy largely overlaps with the private economic sector, excluding criminal or illegal activities. It is not in its legal dimensions that the informal economy finds points of connection with the social economy. Regarding Tunisia, the informal sector is considered to be of great importance to the country. Indeed, the reported figures are very significant: a little less than 40% of private sector employment in Tunisia is active in the informal sector. Similarly, more than 80% of these employees work in real estate construction and commerce. These are not conjectures, but the result of serious scientific work.

The World Bank estimates that more than 50% of the Tunisian workforce works in the informal sector, which would represent 38% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). For the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Crafts (UTICA), the country's historical employers' federation, 524,000 out of the 616,000 companies are involved in

parallel trade. These figures date mainly from 2010 and a short walk thru the streets of the center of Tunis is enough to see that the phenomenon has grown mainly since the Tunisian Revolution. This undeniable reality is explained, among other things, by the "porous and permeable" borders with Algeria and especially with Libya. These border areas have facilitated the transit of goods by land.

Official sea routes, tho subject to strict customs controls, in theory, have also fed extensive redistribution networks, particularly around major coastal cities. With an overwhelming majority, products made in Asia and particularly in China flood the local market: electronics, plastics, tableware, and even cosmetic products. How is it that smuggling routes, which traverse the same mountainous or desert paths, manage to pass thru checkpoints and surprise inspections with relative ease? This last question implies the implicit involvement of official authorities in the remarkable proliferation of this parallel and clandestine sector.

Certainly, the informal economy is the source of several problems and clearly harms the national community. This is due to the easy and completely illegal gains for some business leaders in the construction materials, food processing, and all subsidized product trades. The offending entrepreneur keeps an anemic accounting under the pretext of "the revolution," fattens a well-hidden black box in liquid gains, and does not pay taxes. Meanwhile, the State subsidizes the profit margin of distributors who charter entire trucks to Libya, essentially. However, it should be recognized that this economy allows people who have broken away from the job market to reconnect with economic activity. Entire families live off this activity.

The State's inability to boost the social elevator and the alignment of training supply with job offers have led the same people, from the same popular classes and the same neglected interior regions, to live on the margins of society. But that is not where the main failure of the State lies. It is precisely because of the inability to ensure an equitable redistribution of wealth that we have discouraged underqualified or long-term unemployed individuals from joining the withholding tax and social security systems.

About 700,000 Tunisians directly live off the informal economy today. Thus, the loss in direct and indirect taxes for the State would be inestimable. This would also be the case for the health and retirement insurance funds to which these assets would have contributed. In a country undergoing democratic transition for over a decade, this situation presents a significant challenge for the State, which should, thru fair and appropriate public policies, ensure the transition from the existing informal economy to a "true social and solidarity economy."

It seems obvious to us that after the massive destruction of several production units and the massive departure of expatriate entrepreneurs, a significant portion of the active population, who were employed, found themselves unemployed without notice or compensation. Therefore, the informal circuit has seen increased development to meet the service needs of the Tunisian population, and this is due to the accumulated experience of this population, meaning that this workforce was able to easily reintegrate into the production circuit of goods and services for the provision of parallel services.

The development of the informal economy is therefore supposed to be a reaction to the failure of the formal economy circuit. This is how this circuit was able to secure a position of development and take over considerably to meet the needs of a population in crisis. In an effort to meet the needs of Tunisians, the informal circuit would thus be formed by small commercial transport companies, services that are not integrated into the legal and institutional framework of the State and the modern economy. It is the formal economy that ultimately promotes the reopening of activities in the informal sector with the mission of enhancing the role of the informal economy finds its foundation within Tunisian society.

Although the formal economy is the source of income for the entire Tunisian population, current economic realities seem to somewhat contradict this assertion due to the diversity of activities we find in cities like Kasserine, Eljem, or even Ben Guerdenne or Tataouine, so we are forced to talk more about informal activities or the informal circuit. This economic disruption that occurs in these cities is largely explained by job loss, the refusal of investors to make investments in these remote areas of the country, leading to a massive exodus toward the coastal regions, providing a precarious level of income without even ensuring food subsistence.

Moreover, among the factors contributing to the emergence of the informal economy in Tunisia, we can mention the search for additional income thru parallel activities conducted by socio-professional categories from both the public and private sectors in order to ensure their survival by demonstrating dynamism and ingenuity in the operation of small production units, which we call "resourcefulness," thus leading to the informal economy.

In this perspective, the most accessible way to improve one's income and overcome material difficulties is thru informal activities, either as the primary source of income or as a means of obtaining additional income for survival. In the Tunisian case, this choice turns out to be a last resort solution adopted by the Kasserinis (Natives of Kasserine, a city in Tunisia) or the Lajmis (Natives of Eljem, a village in Tunisia). It is this increasingly intensive recourse to illicit alternatives and clandestine activities that has profoundly altered the existing formal economic structures in Kasserine to the point where the formal sector is no longer considered the sole source of their survival income, but rather taking into account other activities, including those of an informal nature.

It should be noted without ambiguity that this economy is not to be overlooked as it sustains almost the entire population in several regions of the country such as Eljem, Kasserine, Ben Guerdenne, and many others. These regions represent favorable grounds where formal and informal sectors blend with almost total confusion. This paradoxical duality could be considered our starting point that stimulated us to address our issue. It is in this spirit that we proposed to focus our research on the topic titled "The Informal Economy in Tunisia: Current Situation, Issues, and Challenges, Case of the City of Kasserine." It is evident that any work that aims to be scientific or rather academic must be examined in time as well as in space, to properly define the contours of the subject and facilitate the methodological approach that we will implement throughout this study. Despite the importance of the informal sector, which affects different regions of Tunisia, we will focus, for methodological reasons, on the development of the informal economy and its consequences in the city of Kasserine as our field of investigation, since this border city on the edge of Algeria presents itself as the "bastion" of the informal economy in this country. On the temporal level, our work will primarily focus on the Tunisian Revolution as a pivotal moment in the contemporary history of Tunisia.

This historical choice will allow us to delineate the key periods of our work. Similarly, this will help us measure the impact of this historical upheaval on the country in general and on informal activities in particular. In light of the subject we are developing in our research work, it is necessary for us to precisely explain the fundamental reasons that led us to address this issue in relation to the informal sector in Tunisia. As a researcher in sociology, we make the informal economy one of the major concerns, essential in existing socio-economic forms or theories. The integration of this sector into the creation of new production units is developing, for better or worse, from the informal sector, a development that is linked to reasons that can vary from one city to another.

Regarding the present research focusing on the city of Kasserine, the study of this case is suggested to us in numerous studies as a major site for the development of the phenomenon. It is, from the outset, the initial reason that motivated us from the start to choose this phenomenon as the subject of our research. Indeed, given the complexity of the phenomenon of informal economies in Kasserine, as in other regions of Tunisian territory, we believe it is necessary to support this interest on three levels, namely: personal interest, scientific interest, and societal interest.

It is very important for us in the analysis of this subject, given our background in sociology, to highlight the magnitude of the multisectoral crisis that has been shaking the country for several years now, the extreme impoverishment of a large majority of the Tunisian population, the crisis and widespread job loss, as well as the resurgence of informal sector activities, have not left us indifferent in the search for ways and means to overcome this crisis. Indeed, due to the loss of their jobs, the "new unemployed" are often overlooked in the class of explanatory variables of the crisis and in the implementation of economic recovery measures. This near neglect represents the primary motive that drove us to propose such sociological research. We must say that this lack of economic growth, hindering the possibility of productive investment in the formal sector, is also relayed by the lack of recruitment in the public and mining sectors, which have seen an increasingly large number of local officials switch to the informal circuit. This employment crisis turns out to be among the fundamental causes of the remarkable increase in the volume of the informal sector compared to the formal sector.

On the scientific level, the development of this work would probably be of great use because it will include the informal economy in a socio-economic approach. Such consideration should lead future researchers to redefine public development aid strategies, particularly in developing countries like Tunisia. Taking this last factor into account would prove, following the hypotheses we will formulate later, that the practice of informal activities remains the sole prerogative in the economic life of this kind of country. Careful observation of daily life, particularly in the case of Kasserine and similar cities, shows that there is a significant informal sector due to individual, intelligent initiatives; the vitality of this sector is first manifested in the urban environment. However, despite its importance to the subjects who will be interviewed during our meeting, this sector has a catastrophic impact on Tunisia's economic balance.

Our study on the development of the informal economy circuit is very important from a societal perspective. Indeed, this informal activity, despite its negative impact on development and the formal sector, presents itself as an emergency alternative that would allow men who have lost their jobs to integrate in another way in order to improve their income from a model that is more integrated into their own economic environment, hence the rapid development of the informal economy circuit, which holds a prominent place in this type of city, notably Kasserine. Following this emergency situation, both economically and sociologically, we have developed a problem statement that stems from the following major question:

What place does the informal sector occupy in Tunisia on both the economic and social levels, in the new context of disruption following the outbreak of a full-fledged revolution, and what is the impact of the latter on this sector? In this sense, the issue underlying this study is based on the following paradox: the informal sector can encompass both strategies that fall under a purely survival economy, as well as illegal activities that stem from economic crime.

- Guiding Idea 1: the informal sector fulfills a social function in the form of moderating social tension thru the absorption of the unemployed but also thru contributing to social satisfaction (provision of services, production of useful and accessible goods, increase in household income and standard of living...). In short, the informal economy can be considered a survival economy.
- Guiding Idea 2: There is no efficient economic analysis if a specifically social dimension is not introduced.
- Guiding Idea 3: The informal sector plays an important economic function thru a considerable contribution to the formation of local wealth due to the near absence of public institutions.

This issue raises questions about the informal economy that could be detailed thru the following questions:

1. How does the informal economy manage to develop under the eyes of public authorities?
2. What official strategy is in place to recover this sector and integrate it into the formal economy?

In order to address this issue, we opted for a methodology based on two main approaches related to field research: the semi-directive interview, case study, and participant observation. At this stage of our study, we will limit ourselves to specifying that we have decided to apply a hybrid methodology that takes advantage of the semi-directive interview's ability to understand the interviewed subjects and the effectiveness of participant observation, which promotes direct and real contact with the sample in question and the field that represents the object of our work.

## **II. METHOD AND MATERIAL**

The methodological choice intrinsically stems from the predefined objectives as well as the advanced theoretical considerations. First, we plan to describe and justify the relevance of the qualitative approach chosen to understand the subjective reality of the informal economy in Kasserine/Tunisia. This involves analyzing the interactions between the actors involved in this economy, including informal workers, buyers, street vendors, and members of the local community. By choosing a qualitative approach to examine the informal economy in Kasserine, Tunisia, our objective was to explore the interactions between the various actors involved in order to better understand its subjective reality. By focusing on the experiences, motivations, and obstacles encountered by participants in this field and members of the local community, we aim to conduct an in-depth analysis of this

economy in the region. We are convinced that our methodological approach constitutes a suitable method for studying the informal economy in this region and that it will provide a solid foundation for analyzing the specific dynamics and challenges of this economic reality. Next, we will provide a detailed explanation of the elements of the sampling method used in this study. In a second step, we will review the use of typological analysis as a technique for analyzing qualitative data. In order to better understand the dynamics of interactions in the context of the informal economy in Kasserine, Tunisia, based on the experiences of the involved actors, a qualitative approach focused on the theme appears particularly relevant and indispensable.

As Pierre Paillé and Alex Mucchielli point out, "any qualitative analysis involves a certain form of thematization" (PAILLE and MUCCHIELLI, 2008). This methodology seems to align with the theoretical framework and empirical objectives of this study, as it offers a means to access networks and interactions in the informal economy from the subjective experiences of the individuals who participate in it.

This approach, often recommended in sociological studies, has been widely used and validated in research on the informal economy, as evidenced by the work of researchers such as Chantraine, Scheer, and Milhaud (2012), Scheer (2014a), Milhaud (2017), etc. As part of this study, the qualitative methodology relies on interviews with individuals who have been involved in the informal economy of smuggling in Kasserine, and should allow us to grasp their economic experience.

The approach we implemented is based on interviews conducted with 27 participants, which should allow us to understand the economic dynamics in the city. Thus, social and economic interactions are examined from the perspective of the interviewees, thereby placing the study within a subjective framework. Moreover, Alvarado Pirés (1997, p. 33) emphasizes that: "... subjectivity is of paramount importance for the understanding, interpretation, and scientific explanation of human behaviors."

#### ***A. Investigation Techniques and Data Collection Tools***

To approach a particular field, known to be difficult and controversial, we initially chose an approach based on semi-directive interviews and participant observation.

#### ***B. Semi-Directive Interview: Approach, Conducting the Interviews: Places, Time, Duration, and Interview Guide***

The interviews on the informal economy of smuggling in Kasserine were conducted in emblematic places of this complex socio-economic reality, such as the "Zouhour" neighborhood and the "Ennour" neighborhood, where informal activities are omnipresent. These neighborhoods represent the daily lives of the residents and actors of the informal economy in Kasserine. In terms of time, the interviews were flexible and adaptive, without strict constraints, thus fostering sincere and in-depth exchanges on the realities of the informal economy in the region. The duration of the interviews varied depending on the richness of the testimonies and the depth of the discussions, thus offering a nuanced perspective on this crucial subject. These interviews took place in a representative setting and allowed for authentic exchanges with local actors in the informal economy in Kasserine.

To approach the smugglers, we adopted an approach of calling them by their first names and not subjecting them to interrogation about the reasons for their involvement in smuggling, in order to break the ice and establish some sympathy. On average, the duration of the recorded interviews was approximately 75 minutes, reflecting the depth and breadth of the discussions. The semi-structured interview includes sociodemographic indicators (age, gender, social origin, marital status...), 8 themes divided into sub-themes by an elaborate interview guide, which includes the following variables: family lineage, educational trajectory, residential trajectory, relationship with the State, relationship with the social environment, regional and national belonging, relationship with the market, relationship with citizenship, and relationship with professional activity (see table 1: interview grid). In addition to semi-structured interviews, which offer detailed perspectives on individual experiences, participant observation proves indispensable for holistically understanding daily practices and interactions within the informal economy.

**Table 1. Interview Grid**

| <b>Themes</b>                                   | <b>Sub-themes</b>   | <b>Reminders</b>                       |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Family Lineage</b>                           | Family composition<br>Childhood experiences Memories<br>Relationship within the family  | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>School Trajectory</b>                        | School itinerary<br>School disruption and reaction Dream job  | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Residential Trajectory</b>                   | City of residence<br>With family or alone<br>Rural or urban area<br>Rural exodus for work   | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Professional Trajectory</b>                  | Current profession<br>Specificity / other<br>Training completed<br>Failure/ success<br>Professional network<br>Sector of activity<br>Motivations / Project<br>Personal choice / Obligation<br>Continuity / rupture<br>Perception / environment<br>Goods<br>Obstacles encountered<br>Importation/ commercialization<br>Economic/state risk<br>Objectives achieved or not | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Report to the State</b>                      | Relationship with the State and<br>Trust in the State and economic regulation<br>Relations with associations  | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Relationship with the Social Environment</b> | Relationship with the social and family environment   | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Regional and national belonging</b>          | Regional affiliation Regional solidarity<br>National solidarity<br>Family solidarity  | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Market report:</b>                           | Day at the market<br>Hours spent at the market<br>Relationship with market stakeholders<br>Means of transportation<br>Satisfaction / work   | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Relationship to Citizenship :</b>            | Citizenship<br>The policies<br>Economy of the country   | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |
| <b>Relationship to Entrepreneurial Activity</b> | Experience / past and present<br>Life and the informal sector<br>Fortune  | Reminder of the sub-themes not covered |

**C. Participant Observation****Table 2. Observation Grid**

| <b>Themes</b>                        | <b>Sub-themes</b>  | <b>Justifications</b> |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Places and spaces of smuggling       | Border crossing points<br>Informal markets<br>Warehouses and storage areas   | Photos / videos       |
| Actors of smuggling                  | Carriers Resellers Intermediaries<br>Other profiles  | Photos / videos       |
| Products and goods of smuggling      | Types of products (consumer goods, fuels, raw materials,<br>Supply and distribution channels<br>Volumes and values of flows    | Photos / videos       |
| Interactions with the formal economy | Links between formal and informal actors<br>Forms of collaboration or competition<br>Impact of smuggling on the formal economy | Photos / videos       |
| Role of authorities and institutions | Strategies of control and repression<br>Forms of tolerance or corruption<br>Effectiveness of public policies                   | Photos / videos       |
| Socio-economic dynamics              | Sociodemographic profiles of the actors<br>Living and working conditions<br>Survival and social mobility strategies            | Photos / videos       |
| Networks and social capital          | Sociodemographic profiles of the actors<br>Living and working conditions<br>Survival and social mobility strategies            | Photos / videos       |
| Relationships with authorities       | Forms of arrangement and negotiation<br>Strategies of avoidance and circumvention<br>Incidence of corruption                   | Photos / videos       |
| Economic and social impacts          | Effect on prices and supply<br>Impact on employment and income<br>Consequences on local development                            | Photos / videos       |

As part of our study, we used on-site observation, a form of participant observation particularly suited to our approach. This method allowed us to immerse ourselves directly in the studied context, becoming full participants in the observed reality. Concretely, this translated into our active participation in the activities and interactions of people within their natural environment. We were thus able to observe their behaviors, practices, and ways of functioning directly and in depth, while being fully integrated into their daily lives. This immersion allowed us to integrate into the community and observe the economic activities up close. In addition to our stays in Kasserine, our participation in two commercial trips to Algeria. The duration of each trip was three to four days. These outings allowed us to observe the details of trip organization, understand the logistical challenges,

and gather testimonies from the participants. Our objective, using this tool, is to "make the studied world visible from the inside" (Coulon, 2002, p. 103), that is to say, to understand, from the inside, the worldview and the rationality of the actions of the individuals concerned. The researcher's position shifted from that of a "complete observer" to that of a "participant as observer" (Gold, 1958). Based on the previous logic, a participant observation grid was established, which includes the following variables: The places and spaces of smuggling, the actors of smuggling, the products of smuggling, the interactions with the formal economy, the roles of authorities and institutions, the socio-economic dynamics, the networks and social capital, and the economic and social impact (see table 2: observation grid).

#### **D. Study Population**

Our sample consists of 27 subjects (5 women and 22 men), aged between 17 and 40 years. The table below reveals the different characteristics of the survey population.

**Table 3. Study Population**

| <b>The Interviewers</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Sex</b> | <b>Intellectual level</b> |
|-------------------------|------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Nabil                   | 25         | M          | Primary                   |
| Ali                     | 36         | M          | Universitary              |
| Samira                  | 38         | F          | Primary                   |
| Jamila                  | 30         | F          | Secondary                 |
| Omar                    | 30         | M          | Universitary              |
| Samir                   | 30         | M          | Secondary                 |
| Gilani                  | 30         | M          | Primary                   |
| Abed sater              | 28         | M          | Universitary              |
| Seif Allah              | 40         | M          | Baccalaureate             |
| Karim                   | 25         | M          | Secondary                 |
| Hafidh                  | 23         | M          | Primary                   |
| Emna                    | 35         | F          | Primary                   |
| Haydher                 | 26         | M          | Primary                   |
| Adel                    | 22         | M          | Primary                   |
| Fathi                   | 32         | M          | Secondary                 |
| Mouhamed                | 25         | M          | Baccalaureate             |
| Montaser                | 26         | M          | Universitary              |
| Hadhi                   | 25         | M          | Universitary              |
| Sihem                   | 33         | F          | Primary                   |
| Anis                    | 35         | M          | Primary                   |
| Bilel                   | 28         | M          | Baccalaureate             |
| Houssin                 | 40         | M          | Primary                   |
| Rhouma                  | 17         | M          | Secondary                 |
| Adel                    | 40         | M          | Primary                   |
| Wahbi                   | 32         | M          | Secondary                 |
| Hanen                   | 29         | F          | Baccalaureate             |

### E. Data Collection

An interview grid was developed to guide the interviews on social relations in the context of smuggling in Kasserine. The six categories of the grid focused on family, school, professional, regional, and state-related relationships, allowing for the exploration of social dynamics within the context of smuggling. A typological analysis of the different profiles and experiences of the individuals involved allows for the formulation of recommendations to support the informal economy and promote more inclusive development in Kasserine. (See table 3: interview analysis grid).

Regarding our participant observation and during the immersion period, a detailed log is maintained to record observations, reflections, and emerging hypotheses. By combining this inductive approach with source triangulation, we are able to conduct a thorough and exhaustive analysis of the informal economy associated with smuggling in Kasserine (See Table 4: Participant Observation Analysis Grid).

**Table 4. Semi-Directive Interview Analysis Grid**

| <b>Themes</b>                                   | <b>Examples of Testimonies</b>  |
|---|---|
| <b>Family Lineage</b>                           | <i>"My father has always been involved in border trade, it's a family tradition for generations."</i>   |
| <b>School Trajectory</b>                        | <i>"I had to stop my studies very early to help my family with smuggling, it was the only solution to meet our needs."</i>                            |
| <b>Professional Trajectory</b>                  | <i>"After working a few years in the public service, I finally joined the family smuggling business, it's more lucrative."</i>                        |
| <b>Residential Trajectory</b>                   | <i>"Since I settled on the border, I live between two countries, dividing my time between Kasserine and the neighboring city."</i>                    |
| <b>Report to the State</b>                      | <i>"The authorities are well aware of our activity, but they turn a blind eye as long as we remain discreet and pay them our 'right of passage'."</i> |
| <b>Relationship with the Social Environment</b> | <i>"In our community, smuggling is seen as an honorable activity, it's a way to provide for our needs when the State abandons us."</i>                |
| <b>Regional and National Belonging</b>          | <i>"Although I am Tunisian, I feel first and foremost Kassérien." Our region has always been marginalized by the central power.</i>                   |
| <b>Market Report:</b>                           | <i>"Thanks to smuggling, I managed to set up my own business and support my family." It's the only way to make it here."</i>                          |
| <b>Relationship to Citizenship :</b>            | <i>"I don't really feel like a full citizen." The State only sees us as fraudsters when we contribute to the local economy."</i>                      |
| <b>Relationship to Entrepreneurial Activity</b> | <i>"Smuggling allowed me to develop a real sense of business and entrepreneurship." It's a very competitive and risky sector."</i>                    |

**Table 5. Participant Observation Analysis Grid**

| Themes                               | Sub-themes   | Image analysis  |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Places and spaces of smuggling       | Border crossing points<br>Informal markets<br>Warehouses and storage areas   | Photos / videos |
| Actors of smuggling                  | Transporters, Resellers, Intermediaries, Other profiles  | Photos / videos |
| Products and goods of smuggling      | Types of products (consumer goods, fuels, raw materials, Supply and distribution channels<br>Volumes and values of flows       | Photos / videos |
| Interactions with the formal economy | Links between formal and informal actors<br>Forms of collaboration or competition<br>Impact of smuggling on the formal economy | Photos / videos |
| Role of authorities and institutions | Strategies of control and repression<br>Forms of tolerance or corruption<br>Effectiveness of public policies                   | Photos / videos |
| Socio-economic dynamics              | Sociodemographic profiles of the actors<br>Living and working conditions<br>Survival and social mobility strategies            | Photos / videos |
| Networks and social capital          | Organizational structures Relationships of trust and reciprocity<br>Circulation of information and resources                   | Photos / videos |
| Relationships with authorities       | Forms of arrangement and negotiation<br>Strategies of avoidance and circumvention<br>Incidence of corruption                   | Photos / videos |
| Economic and social impacts          | Effect on prices and supply<br>Impact on employment and income<br>Consequences on local development                            | Photos / videos |

This more flexible approach has helped enrich our analyzes by allowing the emergence of new perspectives and knowledge on the informal economy of smuggling in the city of Kasserine.

### III. RESULTS

The results of the survey conducted in Kasserine, Tunisia, highlight a series of complex socio-economic challenges, particularly emphasizing that smuggling in the region is predominantly a male activity. Our interpretation will be selective and oriented according to the main objectives of our issue. At the level of the results, we will focus on:

Draw an anthropological portrait

- The economic and political stakes
- The impact of a disadvantaged and border region
- The unemployment crisis and especially among graduates
- The importance of school dropout as a main factor

### **A. The Male Domination of this Activity**

Thus, we will distribute these results according to our axes: familial, educational, professional, regional, and related to the State, informal economy. It should be mentioned that a single axis can include the results related to two or more parameters from our grid according to a contiguity relationship, as we will indicate in parentheses in each case.

#### *a. The Family Network (Family Lineage)*

Family involvement is explained by a hereditary factor in this informal activity. Thus, most of the interviewed subjects have at least one member of their nuclear or extended family who is active in this sector. This is illustrated by the response of an interviewed subject who stated:

*"...Smuggling is my destiny, it's a family asset."*

According to the responses provided by the interviewed subjects, we can undoubtedly deduce that the informal economy in Tunisia, particularly in Kasserine, is closely linked to family ties. In this region, marked by economic difficulties and a high unemployment rate, many young people find themselves involved in informal activities such as smuggling to support their families. In this regard, Neji stated:

*"I left school to work in gasoline smuggling by performing secondary tasks." Then, after getting my driver's license, I became an active member and my activity became more profitable. Now, I run a small smuggling network and the goods transported are more varied.*

Family ties play a crucial role in these informal economic dynamics, where the need to support their families drives many young people to engage in often risky but necessary activities to survive in a difficult economic context. Stories like Jamel's reflect the complex reality of young people in Kasserine, who face socio-economic challenges that push them to find alternative means to ensure their own and their family's livelihood.

*"I threw myself into this field mainly to financially support my family." I want my mother to be proud of me.*

School dropout is a factor that is relayed by a noticeable desire among most of the interviewed subjects to start a professional life very early.

### **B. Career Path**

Most of the interviewees stated that smuggling remains, for them, the result of a personal decision: dropping out of school to work in the field of smuggling. Smuggling as a personal or subjective decision meets the following criteria:

- A necessity for survival due to the lack of other alternatives.
- A personal choice to achieve a certain material independence.
- A concern for emulation and imitation (a former classmate, a former friend, a cousin ...)
- Self-affirmation is a source of pride.

All the subjects interviewed (regardless of their educational level) explained their forced choice by the absence of development programs, social inequality, regional imbalances, and the absence of the State. In this regard, one of the interviewees stated:

*"Being a smuggler was not a choice." Originally, it was a disappointment with a university system that failed in relation to the job market. If I am a smuggler today, it is because my university degree offered me no chance to work.*

### **C. Thus, A Female Graduate Added Bitterly**

*"The day I got my baccalaureate, I was very happy." I saw the future in rosy terms. When I graduated from university, we slaughtered sheep, we organized a feast. But, all that fell thru. In Tunisia, the degree and the job are not adequate.*

This disconnect between academic training and the job market is exacerbated in Kasserine by the marginalization that this region has always suffered from, considered by all interviewees as a disadvantaged area on the fringes of regional and sustainable development.

*a. Residential Trajectory, Social Environment, Regional Affiliation*

The clandestine activity of smuggling in the Kasserine region is primarily masculine. This masculine aspect can be explained by different reasons: The city of Kasserine is generally classified on the geographical and demographic map of Tunisia as an inland and predominantly rural region. This rural society is distinguished by a paradoxical aspect: the man is considered the head of the family who has the duty to provide for his family's needs. This reality contrasts with the fact that women represent a very significant part of the active population. Indeed, rural women in this region are part of the active population but primarily in the agricultural sector. In this context, one of the women interviewed specified:

*"As a woman, I faced some difficulties at the beginning. However, because of the money I was able to earn, my family now accepts my clandestine work. Sometimes my parents even encourage me to work more. "*

This rural region is distinguished by the patriarchal criterion based on male power. This social structure considers the male as a representation of courage, aggressiveness, and the nomadic spirit. In this context, the great distinction between the male and the female lies in this masculine predilection for nomadic activities (travel, movement). Smuggling in this perspective appears as a purely masculine specificity. On the female side, this paradoxical society dominated by a fundamentally Arab-Muslim culture considers women as "objects" directly linked to the issue of honor. In this context, one of the interviewees stated:

*"Despite the family's refusal, I was determined to pursue this activity." Already, I suffer from a look of segregation and sexism in the midst of these men. This segregation is greatly amplified by the poverty and unemployment situation that my family and the region in general are suffering from.*

The problems raised by the individuals we interviewed concern not only isolated cases but also project onto a more general framework, that of the city of Kasserine as a disadvantaged region. This will also allow us to understand the social structure managed by the informal sector in this border region.

*b. A Subject Interviewed Stated*

*"I am aware that this is not a personal problem." My life and my involvement in smuggling is a regional phenomenon linked to the marginalized aspect of our region. The train of development and economic growth has not passed and will not pass thru Kasserine. It is destined for other more fortunate regions.*

Smuggling, as a manifestation of the informal economy, represents a main activity not only in the city of Kasserine but also in most of the interior regions of Tunisia, mainly border areas. This dominance of smuggling in these disadvantaged regions is explained by economic and social crises. It should be remembered that the governorate of Kasserine is naturally defined as an agricultural region. This importance of the primary sector is increasingly fragile for the farmer, which has led many individuals to abandon this activity in terms of investment and labor.

In this regard, one of the interviewees, who started in the agricultural sector before throwing herself into the arms of smuggling, stated:

*"I dropped out of school very early and I was forced to work on land that was family property." But the land does not provide enough money and water becomes an insurmountable problem. So, I found myself forced to abandon the land and work in the Koutra.*

The service sector can be considered as the weak point of the economy and growth in disadvantaged regions in general and Kasserine in particular. This sectoral crisis is perfectly illustrated in the tourism sector, which is marginalized in these types of regions. Certainly, successive political choices have been based on coastal areas as preferred destinations for this sector.

One of the interviewees summarized the near absence of these last two sectors by stating:

*"In a region deprived of development and where formal economic sectors are unable to provide serious employment opportunities, smuggling is not only an alternative but a truly inevitable destiny."*

This dimensional crisis was exacerbated by the advent of the Tunisian revolution in 2010/2011. This revolution had a very negative impact on the inhabitants of this region who experienced a paradoxical situation ranging from dream to disillusionment. In this context, one of the subjects interviewed stated:

*"I hoped that the revolution would change everything, but unfortunately, the economic and social situation has become more serious." I chose smuggling to realize my impossible dream.*

The failure accentuated the feeling of inequality and injustice among individuals related to this region. This disillusionment strengthened the power of smugglers who were able to take advantage of this new post-revolutionary crisis. If the results of our interview allowed us to understand the main factors of smuggling as we detailed above, they offered us answers that we exploited, at the level of interpretation, to grasp the distinctive criteria of the "smuggler's profession."

#### **D. The Smuggler's Profession**

Our analyzes of the interviews allowed us to sketch a certain sociological and anthropological portrait that summarizes the smugglers. Furthermore, following our interview, we were able to define the distinctive criteria of a smuggler linked to a disadvantaged region like that of Kasserine. To make our interpretation more methodical, we will use the operational concept of "anthropological portrait."

As we specified at the beginning of this second part, we must distinguish between two types of smugglers. The survival smuggler opts for smuggling out of necessity to overcome a miserable social status, as this category of smuggler has no other alternative to obtain an income that allows them to meet their needs. In this context, several interviewed subjects express in their responses their dissatisfaction with engaging in this type of activity.

##### *a. One of the Interviewees Stated*

*"I would have liked to engage in a formal and less risky activity. But, I didn't have a choice. I am a man and I have gone thru times when I didn't even have the money for basic needs. I felt humiliated and worthless. So, smuggling simply allows me to live or rather to survive".*

The hereditary smuggler who controls all the economic and security structures in this informal activity in such a way that they possess real power over other smugglers and the region itself. This category is not obliged to engage in smuggling, but they stick to this activity to increase their wealth and confirm their inherited powers. One of the subjects interviewed confirmed these last two characteristics by adding:

*"It's a risk to take, and you have to be quite bold to do this job because every outing is a real adventure." At the beginning of our meeting, I didn't want to participate in this interview because I'm suspicious of everything and I don't really want either my life or my work. A smuggler must always be careful".*

These testimonies well illustrate the reality of the risks faced by many young people in Kasserine, such as economic and social obstacles that push them toward smuggling as a means of survival and helping their families. The State's involvement: (relationship with the State, relationship with citizenship)

The world of smuggling is implicitly managed by public authorities, such as customs officers and border police, who facilitate the task of smugglers by receiving "bribes" and materially benefit from this type of informal activity. In short, the formal encourages the informal to take root.

##### *b. One of the Smugglers Claims*

*"Smuggling is facilitated by state actors, we know the corrupt border security agents, during their service, we pass the goods quietly by giving cash, and we continue on our way." Corruption is the only way to survive as a smuggler.*

At the end of this stage, we can deduce that smuggling is based on the one hand on the economic and social crisis and, on the other hand, on security and customs involvement. We have noticed that the STATE is involved in the informal sector. In this sociological text, smuggling is once again presented as an ultimate alternative to overcome this situation of personal, familial, social, and psychological crisis. All our interviewees presented smuggling as an informal activity, in the form of a reaction not only against social misery but also against the State.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The socio-economic situation in Kasserine, one of the most disadvantaged regions in Tunisia, is marked by high rates of unemployment and poverty, creating fertile ground for illegal activities such as smuggling. This economic marginalization, exacerbated by a lack of job opportunities, drives many young people to turn to smuggling as a means of livelihood. With limited local industries, young people often find themselves with no choice, which raises questions about regional development policies and the need for investments in sustainable economic sectors. The impact of this situation on education is also concerning. Many young people drop out of school to dedicate themselves to smuggling, which limits their future prospects and perpetuates a cycle of poverty. This phenomenon can be analyzed thru the concept of human capital, which emphasizes the importance of education and skills to access economic opportunities.

Smuggling is often normalized in these communities, where it is perceived as an acceptable activity. Social and family networks play a crucial role in initiating this activity, reinforcing risky behaviors. This can be analyzed thru the concept of socialization, which refers to the process by which individuals integrate the norms and values of their culture. The social acceptance of smuggling raises questions about cultural norms and values that influence the perception of illegality. Finally, the institutional response to this phenomenon is essential. Corruption and weak institutions promote the proliferation of smuggling, and it is crucial to explore how to strengthen these institutions and improve governance. Public policies must be revised to meet the needs of young people, by creating jobs, improving access to education, and supporting local economic development. This can be addressed thru the concept of participatory governance, which involves citizen engagement in the decision-making process.

The analysis work has allowed us to understand the full importance of family life in these environments, and to see how the goals of social reproduction (BOURDIEU, Pierre, 2006) revolved much more around the possibilities of feeding oneself, starting a family, and meeting social obligations that allow for participation and a positive status in the various vernacular networks (family, neighborhood community) than achieving wealth that would serve the reproduction of a certain standard of living and purchasing power. Furthermore, the analysis of production, circulation, and redistribution has revealed the presence of certain social spaces for the organization of socioeconomic practices within the general economy of the city of Kasserine. These social spaces being different places with their own regulations that frame socioeconomic activities as well as circulation and redistribution (COLEMAN, James, 1988). This is the regional social framework that is (re)produced more immediately in the spaces of the family, the community, and in the space of employes and non-employees or popular merchants (GRANOVETTER, Mark, 2006). The reproduction of regulations (BOURDIEU, Pierre, 2006), specific to different social frameworks in specific spaces and thru socially localized activities in these spaces, is almost always short-circuited by the co-presence of other regulatory norms.

The results of this survey have highlighted several important aspects. First of all, the predominant involvement of youth in smuggling activities was highlighted (BEN CHIKH, Nidhal, 2016, GASPARINI, Leonardo, and TONAROLLI, Leopoldo, 2017; CHARMES, Jacques, 2022), often motivated by the lack of economic opportunities and the absence of future prospects. In short, the difficult living conditions in the region, particularly high unemployment and poverty, have been identified as factors contributing to the proliferation of smuggling (BERDIEV, Aziz N. & al., 2017). Finally, the survey results also revealed a strong sense of injustice and anger among the residents, which led to social mobilizations aimed at demanding better integration and dignity for the residents of Kasserine (BEN CHIKH, Nidhal, 2016). Socialization in Kasserine primarily takes place within the family framework, where values of respect, solidarity, and mutual aid are instilled from a very young age (BEN CHIKH, Nidhal, 2016, BOUALI, Mounira, & al., 2017). The analysis also reveals the importance of family and social

dynamics in the reproduction of inequalities, as well as the need for a multidimensional approach to address the challenges related to smuggling. Finally, smuggling is seen as a survival strategy in the face of the absence of formal economic opportunities, highlighting the complex relationship between precariousness, marginalization, and resistance to authorities. An integrated approach, recognizing the economic, social, and political interconnections, is crucial for fostering sustainable and inclusive development in the region.

## V. CONCLUSION

The informal economy in Tunisia is an essential component of the economy of developing countries (DCs), and its size has even increased since the revolution. Whatever the growth assumptions for the coming years, the informal economy is here to stay. Yet, it is striking to note that it remains a "terra incognita" of economic policies, largely ignored by the authorities. The overall results obtained have helped to explain the resilience of survival strategies by highlighting the importance of culture on the behavior of social actors in Kasserine. The shift toward the survival strategies sector explains the inability of the current model to meet all the needs of the actors, the identity crisis, and the crisis of development models.

This marginal economy presents itself as an emergency alternative to address the shortcomings of various development plans and take an essential relay to meet the needs of a disadvantaged population. This economic and social crisis that characterizes the Kasserine region as a marginal zone is largely explained by the glaring lack of employment and the excessive reluctance of investors. Reflecting on the proliferation of the informal economy is of crucial importance on a societal level. Indeed, this informal activity, despite its negative impact on development and the formal sector, offers an emergency alternative that would provide an opportunity for individuals who have lost their jobs to integrate and improve their income from a choice that clearly adapts to their own economic environment.

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