

Constitution of CIRIEC-Tunisia on the basis of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT)

Tunis, 28 October 2019



The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) is the main trade union in Tunisia, with more than half a million members. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, the UGTT was part of the national dialogue quartet that ensured the holding of the legislative elections, as well as the ratification of the new constitution in 2014. Over the past two years, their interest in joining CIRIEC has grown, particularly in the context of the plea work being carried out to bring about a framework law on Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) in Tunisia.

Contacts initiated in 2013 in Agadir through ICOSI

Bernard Thiry, Director General of CIRIEC, opened the discussion with a retrospective of the contacts exchanged to date between CIRIEC and UGTT. Akram Bel Haj Rhouma, Expert in SSE and Strategic Planning in Tunisia, pointed out that the very first contacts were initiated in 2013 by Marcel Caballero during an ILO Academy on SSE organized in Agadir (Morocco). They have intensified over the last two years between Arnaud Breuil, representative of ICOSI, and Souad Khallouli and Naïma Hammami, representatives of the UGTT within the Concerted Multi-stakeholder Program (Soyons Actifs/Actives), organized with the support of the French Development Agency¹ and of which ICOSI and the UGTT are members. Arnaud Breuil (Up Group) and Marcel Caballero (Honorary President of ICOSI) were thanked for the key role they have played in establishing this relationship between CIRIEC and UGTT.

The enactment of an SSE law in the spotlight in Tunisia

Naïma Hammami, Deputy Secretary General in charge of Arab and International Relations and Migration of the UGTT, explained that SSE, placed at the center of strategic public policy reforms, is increasingly confirmed as a strategic choice in Tunisia. SSE is recognized by the Social Contract signed in 2013 and the Development Plan 2016-2020 as the third pillar

of development alongside the two public and private sectors. Today, a draft law on SSE, originally initiated by the UGTT, is being prepared by the Tunisian government presidency. It is therefore in this context that the UGTT has shown a particular interest in joining CIRIEC, whose areas of expertise cover both the public and the social and cooperative economy.

The long path towards an SSE law in Tunisia

Despite the will to define a public strategy in this area, Akram Bel Haj Rhouma acknowledged that the establishment of a framework law on SSE in Tunisia, as in other countries, seems complicated to organize: "there is no approach, no common, precise understanding of SSE to identify and conceptualize it". He explained that the Tunisian State shares two different approaches to the definition of SSE: the first, defended by the Ministry of Employment, more focused on social entrepreneurship, and the second, more economic in its vision that integrates the cooperative, mutual and some associations. He stressed the need to set up, in particular, a statistical system and a frame for financing the SSE, which have so far been absent. Akram Bel Haj Rhouma raised a second need, namely to first establish a scientific framework and then to develop a state strategy in partnership with SSE actors. He believes that agreement on concepts and state policies prior to the establishment of a legal text is necessary, and not the other way around.

¹ The PCPA Soyons Actifs/Actives is a capacity building programme for Tunisian and French civil society organizations that aims to reduce inequalities in access to rights. It is a concerted multi-stakeholder program that

currently brings together 48 entities: associations, cooperative unions, local authorities and public authorities from both shores of the Mediterranean.

A back-to-basics for the UGTT & a citizen's initiative

As Lotfi Ben Aïssa, Financial Expert and former Director of Fiscal Studies at the Tunisian Ministry of Finance, pointed out: *"this enthusiasm around SSE is important for the UGTT as an SSE actor that is renewing its initial commitments"*, recalling that trade unionism in Tunisia was a corollary of mutualism and cooperativism. The social option is thus anchored in the UGTT's DNA. He added that this draft bill is a première because it originates from a citizen's initiative: *"a legislative initiative usually belongs to the executive but here, the movement emanates from civil society, which allows for greater general awareness"*. He concluded his presentation by explaining that the UGTT has engaged in a plea and must be a real actor, a stakeholder in the constitution of the SSE in Tunisia. The expertise and international scientific insight provided by CIRIEC would thus be a considerable asset.

SSE in Tunisia: a recent historic background

Souad Khallouli, Attaché in the Department of International Relations and Migration at the UGTT, shared two observations: the first is that there is still - according to her - a lack of scientific studies specific to SSE in Tunisia master's students do not find documents on

Social and public economy: playing on synergies

Like the social economy, the public economy is at the heart of the debate in Tunisia, particularly regarding the policy of privatization of public enterprises. During the discussions, all participants agreed on the importance of considering the complementarity between the social and public economic economy as an alliance and not as an opposition. As Arnaud Breuil pointed out, it is important not to consider the SSE as a substitute economy to compensate for the shortcomings of public authorities. Alain Arnaud agreed: *"It is extremely important to consider that SSE is not an economy of repair, it is not an economy that is made to help those who need it. SSE is in banking, insurance, health. It manages health care institutions, represents 10 to 12% of the GDP for Europe, employs a lot of people, goes through crises in a resilient way"*. This is a direct reference to the importance of putting the finger on the definition of the very essence of the 'social economy'. It is obviously also in this context that the UGTT's interest in joining CIRIEC arose, since the notions of collective economy are part of the genesis of CIRIEC.

In the context of decentralization, Tunisia also has a Local Authorities Code which organizes a transfer of powers and resources to enable the provision of public and collective services, possibly in the form of public-social economy partnerships at local level. *"However, it is important to ensure that this is a*

which to base their work. She then mentioned the lack of theorization of practices, which are essential to advance and promote SSE. The pleading project, carried by the UGTT, aims at remedying this situation.

Arnaud Breuil specified that the outcome of this advocacy project is the result of a very long-term work: ICOSI started working with UGTT on SSE issues almost as soon as after the Revolution in 2014. This program has attracted a lot of participation, especially from public services and has led to the construction of many international programs, both SSE and broader civil society programs (such as the Concerted Multi-Actor Programme 'Soyons Actifs/Actives', organized with the support of the French Development Agency). Arnaud Breuil underlined here that there is indeed a history - albeit recent - of SSE in Tunisia, which has been studied and shared by many civil society actors. The adoption of the draft framework law is eagerly awaited by all stakeholders.

Akram Bel Haj Rhouma agrees with Arnaud Breuil's opinion: there is a certain solid base in terms of SSE in Tunisia with serious reports and studies, but the shortcomings mainly concern the components of SSE: *"We talk too much about SSE but we talk less about its components: cooperatives for example. Moreover, no reliable statistical measures exist. »*

genuine partnership and not an instrumentalization of the social economy by the public authorities" noted Prof. Philippe Bance, President of CIRIEC's International Scientific Council.

Prof. Sami Aouadi (University of Tunis, El Manar) stressed the importance of public enterprises in Tunisia as a strategic tool for industrial policy purposes and as a "driving force for the economy": creating activities, supporting production and skilled employment, in order to develop territories in a structuring way. In fact, despite massive privatizations, the private sector has not "succeeded" in this respect and has only invested in 'rentier' activities that do not produce added value for the country. The public infrastructure sector has been neglected. However, the public sector has to be efficient: while it is legitimate to subsidize activities in the non-market sector, it is not tenable for a public enterprise operating in the competitive sector to accumulate losses.

CIRIEC-Tunisia, first CIRIEC National Section in Africa

The arrival of CIRIEC-Tunisia propels CIRIEC's representation to 23 countries² (January 2020) around the world. CIRIEC-Tunisia, the first CIRIEC National Section on the African continent, was created from two departments of the UGTT: International Relations and Research. Claiming the UGTT's opening position, Naïma Hammami did not rule out the possibility that the Section may subsequently open up to other organizations.

Despite CIRIEC's small representativeness in Africa, it exchanges very regular contacts with the scientific world on the continent, particularly in North Africa, and hopes to deploy its representativeness even more widely. The Tunisian comrades are warmly congratulated on the official recognition of CIRIEC-Tunisia.

² Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Ecuador, France, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Romania, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, Venezuela.