

Promoting Freedom of Expression and Information in Tunisia



BACKGROUND & PROJECT

Since 2011, Tunisia's media landscape has undergone significant transformations, making commendable strides towards political and media pluralism. However, persistent challenges have been compounded by a recently imposed restrictive legal framework that has hindered the pursuit of high-quality and unbiased journalism and has impeded progress towards a more robust and informed media landscape in Tunisia.

Amid this environment, Hivos, in collaboration with Tunisia's National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), initiated a 3-year project: 'Promoting Freedom of Expression and Information in Tunisia.'

The project's overarching objective was to contribute to a Tunisian society committed to the principles of Freedom of Expression (FoE) and Access to Information (AtI), fostering an informed, inclusive, and healthy public debate and democratic processes.

This linking and learning document distils and documents significant impacts and learnings by presenting essential lessons and four case studies, highlighting key achievements throughout the project.

LESSONS LEARNED

FoE and AtI Literacy and Education

Enhancing Journalistic Capacities and Awareness: Empowering journalists with targeted training on key technical and legal aspects related to FoE and AtI amplified their awareness and capacities, and fostered individual growth and societal development. Training ignited a curiosity for ongoing learning journeys, extending beyond single sessions, with longer curricula and follow-up.

Inclusive Knowledge Dissemination: Intentionally including diverse professionals from various fields, genders, and geographical locations in capacity-strengthening opportunities enhanced the equitable dissemination of new knowledge.

Navigating Challenges: Navigating a complex political context and restrictive operating environment posed challenges when applying newly acquired knowledge and exercising legal rights, despite theoretical protection by the law.

Policy Advocacy and Dialogue

Strengthening Technical Capacity and Voice: Engaging journalists in targeted training built technical capacity and enhanced their ability to contribute effectively to larger, multi-stakeholder advocacy and dialogue efforts.

Community Engagement and Participation

Effective Partnerships: Investing in local partners across diverse geographies to deliver community-designed responses underscored the effectiveness of partnerships in achieving tangible, scalable outcomes in low-resource settings. Additionally, this support could lead to lasting relationships.

Working with Youth: Recognising and investing in the youth and student demographic acknowledged their existing knowledge and capacity, and supported their potential to contribute to social change on issues they are interested and invested in.

Engaging Youth: Collaborating with student journalists and youth who are enthusiastic about media and content creation, acknowledged their existing knowledge and capacity, and supported their potential to drive social change on issues that deeply resonate with them.

Adaptability and Resilience

Prioritising Flexibility: Prioritising adaptability in complex and evolving political settings proved crucial for achieving project outcomes. This could evolve further and involve regularly updating project plans and adjusting the Theory of Change as needed.

Sustainability and Long-Term Impact

Supporting Sustainability: Providing key partners with adaptable support and addressing specific institutional challenges while promoting autonomy and independence can lead to more sustainable outcomes, stronger collaborations and create opportunities to scale up initiatives and attract future funding.

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

Amplifying Collaborative Impact: Fostering cross-sectoral collaboration within the media landscape by connecting journalists, lawyers, unions, academics, and other stakeholders enhanced collaboration, fostered diverse perspectives, and generated opportunities for medium to longer-term engagement beyond the project lifespan.



Fact Checking

Tunifact, established by SNJT in early 2021, operates as a dedicated fact-checking unit with a mission to dismantle fake news and misleading information. Comprising an editor in chief and 4 fact-checkers, the unit conducts thorough daily monitoring of both traditional and social media.

Fact-Checking Operations and Analysis:

Conducted 1395 fact-checks, presented 150 "Facts of the Week" on 3 to 4 radio stations and authored 84 in-depth analyses of trending topics.

Collaborations and Partnerships:

Integrated with the Arab Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN) and Africa Facts Network, formed partnerships with 4 national radio stations (National Radio, Radio ML, Radio Sfax, and Radio Saida FM).

Media Presence: Utilised the Tunifact platform and social media for content dissemination, including a beta edition of the mobile application.

Innovations and Engagements: Launched a "Climate Fact" podcast series and joined the Dalil Platform for AI integration in fact-checking.

Capacity Building: Hosted 4 interns from the Institute of Press and Information Sciences, providing training in fact-checking methodologies.



Awareness

National Competitions: Launched 3 editions recognising outstanding journalistic works on FOE and Atl, providing a platform to showcase journalists' efforts in investigating sensitive topics in Tunisia. The final edition focused on the contributions of student journalists and recent graduates.

World Press Freedom Day Campaigns 2021-2:

Conducted campaigns, emphasising the importance of Atl and advocating journalist protection through one-minute videos on social media and television channels, coupled with nationwide poster distribution and publication.

Mini-grants: Awarded grants to 3 local partners supporting activities related to FoE and Atl in Tunisia. The funded projects collectively focused on empowering youth through training in human rights, journalistic ethics, and access to information.

Sprint for Truth Hackathon: Engaged 22 journalism students and activists in a hackathon-style event where each group devised solutions or initiatives to address mis/disinformation, spanning topics like politics, climate change, and health.



Advocacy

Regional Dialogue Sessions: Facilitated 8 sessions, engaging 260 participants in in-depth discussions on critical topics related to media sector reforms, press situation and transition, legal framework and legislation, and access to information.

Mis/disinformation Symposium: Organised a symposium, "The role of fact-checking platforms and post-July 25th, 2021 legislation in reducing information disorder," addressing challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation.

Research and Report: Hivos, in collaboration with SNJT produced and published a [study](#), offering insights into key legal, policy, and legislative documents related to FOE in Tunisia.



Training

Legal Framework: Conducted 4 sessions across 4 governorates, engaging 156 journalists (70% female) focusing on the legal framework, and potential threats to FoE in Tunisia.

Data and Investigative Journalism:

Conducted 8 sessions, engaging 151 journalists (65% female), from across 20 governorates focusing on essential skills and knowledge for working in investigative journalism.



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The three-year project, conducted through four thematic work streams, aimed to achieve three specific objectives.

Journalists produce accurate journalistic content and are aware of and able to exercise their rights to FoE and Atl, as enshrined in Tunisia's Constitution.

Policy makers, public officials, media outlets, CSOs, and other stakeholders collaborate effectively to create better legislation on FoE.

Citizens, as members of the public, become aware of the importance of FoE and access to information as part of the democratic process and initiate actions to hold those in power accountable for promoting a favourable environment for FoE.

TACKLING THE TRUTH:

Tunifact and Sprint for Truth

In a media landscape plagued by mis/disinformation, the Hivos-supported initiatives of Tunifact and the Sprint for Truth event have played a pivotal role in raising awareness and addressing this critical issue in Tunisia's media.

Led by the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), Tunifact, established in early 2021, functions as a dedicated fact-checking unit with the mission to dismantle fake news and misleading information. The unit's accomplishments are noteworthy, having conducted 1395 fact-checks, presented "Facts of the Week" on radio stations, and authored 84 in-depth analyses. Yasmine Dakhli, the editor-in-chief of Tunifact, underscores the necessity of such initiatives, stating, "No one can deny that the media landscape in Tunisia is full of mis/disinformation . . . controlled by politicians, pseudo-experts, columnists, and social media influencers. They usually throw numbers or information without evidence."

Tunifact's impact transcends fact-checking. Its integration with the Arab Fact-Checkers Network and Africa Facts Network, along with partnerships with national radio stations, amplifies its reach and influence. Dakhli stresses the need for more initiatives, stating, "We need to see more initiatives using fact-checking methodologies to counter the spread and influence of fake news." Tunifact's timely interventions underscore the critical role it plays in maintaining accurate information in the public domain.

Complementing Tunifact's formal approach to fact-checking, the Sprint for Truth event, engaged 22 participants, including journalism students and activists, in tackling mis/disinformation. The Truth Sprint event's innovative approach, combining a panel discussion with a hackathon-style competition, enabled participants to devise solutions to combat mis/disinformation in various domains, embracing a more informal and youth-driven strategy. Rania Kesraoui, a participant, reflects on the event, saying, "The competition brought out the creativity and the courage to think out of the box." Kesraoui emphasises the crucial lesson learned about self-belief, stating, "The lesson I learned and aim to consistently apply revolves around self-belief and the capacity to persuade others when one holds a deep conviction in a particular idea or belief."

These diverse efforts not only empower individuals like Kesraoui but also contribute significantly to shaping a more informed and resilient society in Tunisia. As mis/disinformation continues to challenge the media landscape, the timeliness, impact and importance of these initiatives become increasingly evident.

IGNITING SPARKS FOR CHANGE: Mini-grants

In March 2023, Hivos launched mini-grants, aiming to bolster creative and innovative initiatives promoting Freedom of Expression (FoE) and Access to Information (AtI) by Tunisian local organisations. These grants were strategically designed to support projects that would foster citizen awareness and instigate actions for accountability amidst the challenging media landscape.

Out of 20 proposals, three projects were selected, each securing USD 15,000 for implementation over five months. A standout success story was Nefzawa's "Freedom Camp" in Kebili, Southern Tunisia. Majdi Draouil, a digital growth specialist at Nefzawa, described the impact, stating, "The experience empowered participants to combat disinformation, understand their rights, and produce creative projects that contribute to the community's freedom of expression." The camp featured a five-day summer programme for 20 young individuals, covering human rights, journalistic ethics, access to information, and fact-checking. A subsequent mentorship programme guided participants in creating media content focused on freedom of expression and access to information.

Through the 'Lab 54' project, Hope Makers, also a grant recipient, scrutinised the details of decree-law 54, officially intended to counteract 'fake news' but has heightened the challenges to press freedom. Simultaneously, Soutcom implemented the 'Influential Youth for Change' project, engaging 80 young participants in workshops focused on key topics of media and misinformation, while also imparting valuable technical skills.

These mini-grants spotlight the transformative potential and the pivotal role that local organisations can play in crafting tailored responses to national-level issues. Draouil commended the initiative, stating, 'These grants demonstrate a commitment to addressing practical concerns and ensuring sustained impact on freedom of expression and access to information in Tunisia.' Looking forward, the successes underscore the importance of investing in youth to ensure that the sparks of change ignited continue to illuminate the path forward.

TRANSFORMATIVE TRAINING:

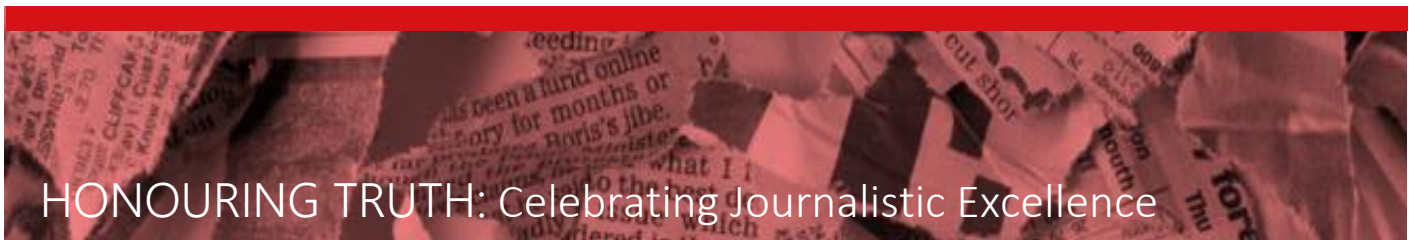
An Investigative Journey

Tunisian journalist Houssam Dallali underwent a profound career shift after participating in a specialised training session on investigative and data journalism supported by Hivos. Formerly a regional correspondent immersed in conventional journalism, Dallali found a passion for uncovering untold narratives during the training, which drew media professionals from across the country. The session not only broadened his skill set but also facilitated valuable connections with like-minded journalists, enriching his professional network.

Empowered by these insights and driven by his newfound commitment to investigative journalism, Dallali returned to south-western Tunisia. There, he delved into investigating environmental pollution caused by phosphate treatment, overcoming challenges and legal obstacles as he asserted his right to access information. His ongoing investigative work continues to delve into environmental pollution issues, building on the foundation laid by the training experience.

Dallali's work has garnered recognition, creating further opportunities and collaborations that provide access to learning opportunities and collaborations with national advocacy organisations. Houssam Dallali's journey underscores the transformative influence of training opportunities, showcasing the potential to impact not only individual careers but also to shape how the communication culture of a country can change and progress. He was one of 151 participants who attended the Investigative and Data Journalism training sessions during the project.

An additional 156 media professionals participated in training sessions focusing on Tunisia's legal framework. Experts covered essential topics such as press freedom rights based on the constitution and international standards, identified gaps in existing laws, and discussed potential threats from upcoming drafts related to audio-visual communication, personal data protection, and digital sphere regulations.



An annual awards competition, devoted to recognising outstanding journalistic endeavours with a focus on freedom of expression (FoE) and access to information (AtI), has firmly established itself as a cornerstone in Tunisia's media calendar. The competition serves as a powerful motivator for journalists, inspiring them to persist in their relentless pursuit of truth and transparency.

In its inaugural year, the competition attracted 25 submissions, a testament to journalists' unwavering commitment to investigative excellence. Wael Ounifi, an investigative journalist at Al Qatiba, clinched victory with his impactful piece titled "Thyna Petroleum Services: The Other Side of the Crimes of Oil Companies in Sfax." Reflecting on the challenges of investigative journalism in Tunisia, Wael expressed, "The government put a lot of pressure on journalists and did not make access to information easy even though we have a law for this."

The second year introduced a thematic focus on "Impunity in Human Rights Issues" and acknowledged the ground breaking work of five exceptional female journalists, including Emna Mornagui and Shaden Ghannam. Their investigation into the pervasive issue of excessive police violence in Tunisia since 2011, highlighting the lack of fair trials for numerous victims, earned them first place. Following her victory, Mornagui urged a broader commitment to inclusivity in Tunisia's media industry, emphasising the "necessity for more diverse voices and perspectives, ensuring that the concerns and experiences of women journalists are adequately represented in media decision-making."

In its most recent round, the competition exclusively invited students and recent graduates, recognising their pivotal role as future advocates of Freedom of Expression (FoE). Sharing his perspective as the student winner, Malek Arif, a 24-year-old Master's degree student stated, "I view the work I've accomplished as a message directed towards both journalists and the entire Tunisian population. This endeavour aims to encourage everyone to show a heightened interest in Freedom of Expression."

Backed by the Hivos grant, the competition has indeed strengthened its impact by promoting excellence and upholding the core principles of journalism in Tunisia. Serving as a guiding force, it assists journalists on a practical journey towards enhancing the standards of journalistic integrity in the country.