

TRACE Project Evaluation Report
of the TRACE Project Tunisian Rural and Agricultural Chains of Employment
November 26, 2025

1. Introduction

This report presents an independent evaluation of the "Economic Recovery Support and Job Creation in the Agricultural Food Sector and Rural Areas in Tunisia" (**TRACE**) project, funded by the World Bank and implemented by the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS). The report aims to enhance transparency and social accountability in the implementation of internationally donor-funded projects.

This evaluation is based primarily on the extent to which the project achieves its social and economic objectives and its positive impact on various beneficiaries, while assessing beneficiaries' knowledge of the project's environmental and social standards and the complaint mechanism, as well as their opinions on the project's compliance with environmental protection standards according to the World Bank's environmental and social framework for the project.

The TRACE project is part of the state's efforts to promote local economic and social development by encouraging decent work and supporting local economic growth. It aims to expand employment opportunities, increase productivity, and stimulate national exports, particularly in economically vulnerable rural areas, while enhancing transparency and ensuring optimal use of external funding.

The TRACE project was approved in 2020 with funding of \$5 million and covers the governorates of **Jendouba, Kairouan, and Gabes**.

2. Project Card

- Project Name: TRACE (Support to Economic Recovery and Job Creation in the Agri-Food Sector and Rural Space),
- Code: P174017
- Funding Entity: The Dutch Government via the World Bank
- Implementing Entity: Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS)
- Project Approval: The project was approved in October 2020 and became effective in April 2021.
- Duration: From April 2021 to December 2026 (after the latest extension).
- Target Regions: Governorates of Gabes, Jendouba, and Kairouan
- Total Project Funding: \$5 million
- Note: 88 projects were actually funded under the first phase of the project (original funding of \$1 million, with additional funding of \$4 million for the second phase), aiming to finance 120 additional projects to achieve the ultimate goal of job creation by 2026.

- **General Objectives:**

- Economic recovery and job creation in rural areas
- Enhancing integration of small producers, cooperatives, and small and medium enterprises
- Supporting entrepreneurship among youth and women

- Improving productivity and competitiveness in the agricultural and food sector
- **Results Achieved as of March 2022 (according to published reports):**
 - Number of beneficiaries receiving technical assistance: 761 (targeting 800)
 - Number of jobs created: 686 (target achieved)
 - Percentage of youth beneficiaries: 78% (target 40%)
 - Percentage of women in jobs: 68% (target 20%)
 - Productivity increase: 90.09%¹ of beneficiaries (target 80%)
 - Revenue increase: 94.5%² of beneficiaries (target 80%)
 - Beneficiary satisfaction rate: 83.6%³ (target 80%)
- **Project Components:**
 - Technical Assistance: Training and technical support for rural agro-entrepreneurs, smallholder farmers, and producers' organizations
 - Non-repayable Grants: Funding for agricultural and rural production, processing, and marketing projects
 - Management and Monitoring: Project management, financial monitoring, and application of World Bank standards in governance and environment
- **Project Documents Available on the World Bank Official Website:**
 - Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF/CGES)
 - Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP/PMPP)
 - Labor Management Plan (LMP)
 - Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM)
 - Financial Audit Reports (2019-2020)
 - Implementation Supervision Reports (ISR) from 2019 to 2020
 - Extension and Restructuring Memos (2020 and 2022)

3. Presentation of Influence Consulting and its Mission

Influence Consulting is a leading Tunisian consulting firm in strategy, communication, leadership, and institutional transformation, working to support institutions, governments, and organizations in enhancing their operational effectiveness, developing their decision-making capacity, and increasing their presence and impact in their environment.

- **Mission of Influence Consulting:**
 - Identify the social and economic impacts of the project on various beneficiaries
 - Monitor the achievement of objectives set in the loan document by the World Bank
 - Assess beneficiaries' knowledge of the complaint mechanism
 - Evaluate beneficiaries' compliance with environmental protection standards
 - Provide observations and recommendations on project implementation and achievement of project objectives

4. Field Research Methodology for TRACE Project Evaluation

¹ From the impact study

² From the impact study

³ From the impact study

To achieve the study objectives and provide an in-depth analysis of the TRACE project's governance and field impact, Influence Consulting adopted an integrated research methodology that combines scientific rigor with fieldwork. This methodology began with identifying a diverse and representative sample including different categories of beneficiaries who received funding for their projects, as well as participants whose applications were not accepted, in the three beneficiary governorates: Jendouba, Kairouan, and Gabes.

The quantitative and qualitative research approaches were integrated in a complementary manner; the quantitative survey provided measurable data on beneficiaries' experiences, while semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 project officials at national and regional levels allowed for deeper exploration of participation mechanisms in the TRACE project, scheduled training, then grant acquisition, operational challenges, and procedural evolution across different project versions.

This integration between field and office approaches enabled researchers to build a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the TRACE project, moving beyond superficial analysis to reach accurate conclusions and practical recommendations based on realistic foundations.

❖ **First: Primary Data Collection and Analysis of Official Sources**

This initial phase formed the foundational basis for understanding the TRACE project framework, where researchers relied on official sources published by the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS) as well as the World Bank. These sources included:

- Periodic reports for different project implementation stages
- Announcements of application openings and acceptance criteria
- Lists of accepted and rejected files
- Training materials provided to beneficiaries

These documents were analyzed to identify:

- a. **Communication mechanisms used:** digital platforms, radio stations, social media
- b. **The extent of UTSS's commitment** to transparency through regular information dissemination
- c. **Identified weaknesses:** such as complete reliance on digital channels for registration, which might exclude categories less skilled in using modern technologies
- d. **Identified strengths:** such as good monitoring and flexibility in dealing with different projects
- e. **Project diversity:** compatibility of projects with the surrounding natural and human environment
- f. **Project attractiveness:** ability of the project to attract diverse sectors, especially small and semi-structured enterprises

❖ **Second: Qualitative Study through Semi-Structured Interviews**

The research team conducted a series of in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved in the TRACE project at national and regional levels:

- a. **National Level:** Meeting with the team assigned by the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity to understand the project strategy and framework.
- b. **Regional Level:** Meetings with implementation teams in the governorates of Jendouba, Kairouan, and Gabes. These interviews aimed to identify:
 - Project selection mechanisms and acceptance criteria, particularly operational, environmental, and sustainability criteria

- Challenges faced by teams during implementation
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of monitoring and training mechanisms
- Applied complaint management mechanism

These interviews were recorded and analyzed using thematic analysis methodology to extract key themes and major challenges.

❖ **Third: Quantitative Study through Field Survey**

A unified questionnaire was designed to collect opinions from project beneficiaries in the three target governorates and to design listening sessions for non-beneficiary participants.

Sample Details:

- Jendouba: 15 beneficiaries and 4 non-beneficiaries: October 20, 21, and 28, 2025
- Kairouan: 15 beneficiaries: October 22, 23, and November 05. 2025
- Gabes: 10 beneficiaries and 1 non-beneficiary: November 06 and 07, 2025

Data Collection Procedures:

- The sample was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation of all participating categories
- Surveys were conducted face-to-face to ensure understanding of questions and accuracy of answers
- Each survey took approximately 30-35 minutes

Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical software to extract key results on:

- Beneficiary satisfaction with services provided
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of communication and transparency mechanisms
- Governance in managing different stages of the project in its first and second phases
- Identification of major difficulties faced by beneficiaries
- Determination of the extent of compliance with environmental conditions
- Assessment of the effectiveness of the complaint mechanism

❖ **Fourth: Integration between Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies**

Results from interviews and surveys were merged to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the TRACE project. This integration allowed:

- Confirmation of results by comparing what interviews indicated with survey data
- Deeper understanding by interpreting numbers and statistics in light of personal opinions and experiences
- Identification of gaps between official project perceptions and actual beneficiary experiences

❖ **Fifth: Ethical Considerations and Research Limitations**

- Complete confidentiality: Participants' identities in surveys and interviews were ensured not to be disclosed
- Informed consent: Consent was obtained from all participants before starting the survey
- Accuracy and objectivity: The research team was trained to avoid personal bias during data collection and analysis

5. Results

The "Economic Recovery Support and Job Creation in the Agricultural Food Sector and Rural Areas in Tunisia" project, according to its funders, aims to support rural initiatives that create actual job opportunities in the rural and agricultural food sector. This represents an important model for World Bank projects in Tunisia that need analysis and study not only because of the funding size or number of supported projects, but because of the quality of its governance, its transparency and sustainability, its ability to effectively reach target groups, and the existence of successful mechanisms for managing and handling complaints.

Understanding the beneficiaries' experience of the project and their evaluation of these aspects is not merely a routine evaluation practice but is a cornerstone for improving performance, ensuring optimal use of resources, and building trust between donors and local communities, ultimately achieving the desired development impact.

This report aims to provide a detailed and categorized analysis of the results of a survey conducted with a group of TRACE project beneficiaries, with special focus on the following pillars:

- **Governance and Transparency:** Evaluating the clarity of procedures and decision-making processes, ensuring access to information for beneficiaries, and guaranteeing accountability.
- **Operational Efficiency:** Addressing the performance quality of the project, where it examines the speed and quality of service delivery, execution of activities, and effective use of resources to achieve the planned objectives.
- **Complaint Management:** Focusing on the effectiveness of designated channels for receiving observations and complaints, the project's response, and the extent of interaction with beneficiaries, which enhances positive trust.
- **Project Distribution:** Analyzing the transparency and fairness of project distribution, and their compatibility with the actual needs of target communities, including youth, women, and targeted regions.
- **Environmental and Social Governance:** Reviewing the extent of awareness of the environmental and social plan, beneficiaries' commitment to environmental and social requirements, and their application of environmental practices during project implementation, with attention to occupational health and safety requirements.

The purpose of this analysis is to extract lessons learned and provide practical recommendations that can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of the TRACE project and similar projects in the future, ensuring that these initiatives are not limited to technical and financial support but become an effective tool for empowering rural communities and promoting their economic and social development sustainably.

The importance of this report lies in giving voice to the beneficiaries themselves, as they are the most knowledgeable about the practical reality of the project and the challenges they face. While official reports provide a general picture of performance, direct beneficiary opinions add depth and accuracy in evaluating aspects of governance and transparency. For example, the report evaluates the clarity of documents provided to beneficiaries, ease of access to information about the project, and quality of accompaniment until financing files are prepared and access to funding is obtained, as crucial factors in the beneficiary's sense of justice and equality of opportunity.

Beneficiaries' knowledge of the complaint mechanism and their confidence in its effectiveness also constitutes a fundamental indicator of the quality of the project's governance and its capacity for self-correction.

Furthermore, analysis of project distribution by gender, governorate, and economic activity type reveals the project's inclusivity and its ability to reach different categories and regions, including women, youth, and the neediest areas. The analysis also sheds light on the operational efficiency of the project by evaluating beneficiaries' ability to implement their project activities as planned, the administrative and operational difficulties they faced, which indirectly reflects the effectiveness of the support provided and the quality of preparation and prior planning.

By delving into these precise details, this report aims to provide a comprehensive and balanced vision that helps understand the factors contributing to the success or failure of such projects, and consequently, to provide evidence-based recommendations for designing and implementing more effective and responsive development projects to the needs of target communities.

5.1. Research Methodology

To achieve the study objectives and provide an in-depth analysis of the TRACE project's governance and field impact, Influence Consulting adopted an integrated research methodology that combines scientific rigor with fieldwork. This methodology began with designing a diverse and representative sample including different categories of project beneficiaries, as well as participants who submitted applications, but whose files were not accepted, in the three concerned governorates: Jendouba, Kairouan, and Gabes.

Quantitative and qualitative research approaches were integrated in a complementary manner; the quantitative survey provided measurable data on beneficiaries' perceptions, while semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 project officials at national and regional levels allowed for deeper exploration of work mechanisms, operational challenges, and procedural evolution across different project versions. This integration between field and office approaches enabled researchers to build a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the TRACE project, moving beyond superficial analysis to reach accurate conclusions and practical recommendations based on realistic foundations.

Regarding the non-beneficiary sample, a qualitative study was conducted through dialogue with 5 non-beneficiaries in the governorates of Jendouba and Gabes regarding their participation circumstances and reasons for non-acceptance of their files, and whether they used the complaint mechanism.

This report's analysis relies on data from a survey collected from TRACE project beneficiaries, which aims to evaluate their experience at different stages of the project. The survey covers a wide range of topics, including demographic information of beneficiaries, the nature of their projects, their experience in applying for and obtaining financing, their opinions on project governance and transparency, the economic impact of their projects, their commitment to environmental and social standards, and their interaction with the complaint mechanism.

A data analysis methodology was designed to convert this primary data into organized and measurable information, through which the project's performance can be evaluated in the predetermined axes: governance and transparency, complaint management, operational efficiency, project distribution, and social gender.

In the initial data processing, the first step in the methodology involved cleaning and classifying the data in preparation for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis focused on calculating frequencies and percentages of different variables, such as the percentage of males versus

females among beneficiaries, distribution of projects by economic activity type and governorates, and average scores assigned by beneficiaries to levels of information access, document clarity, and accompaniment quality. For example, the percentage of beneficiaries who were aware of the existence of a complaint mechanism was calculated, the percentage of those who actually filed complaints, and the percentage of those who received responses to their complaints. Data related to job creation, both direct and indirect, and their sustainability were also analyzed, as well as the financial profitability of projects after receiving the grant.

Regarding governance and transparency analysis, a set of indicators derived from survey questions was focused on. For example, "ease of access to information about the project" was evaluated through the average score on a scale from 1 (very difficult) to 7 (very easy). Beneficiaries' answers about "clarity of documents" and "quality of accompaniment" were also considered indicators of procedural transparency and support quality.

As for complaint management, the percentage of beneficiaries who knew about the complaint mechanism was analyzed, then the percentage of those who actually filed complaints, the topics of these complaints, and whether they were responded to or not. These indicators are considered crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of mechanisms established to address problems that beneficiaries might face.

Regarding operational efficiency, reliance was placed on beneficiaries' answers about their ability to implement all planned project activities using available resources, and the administrative and operational difficulties they faced.

As for project distribution and gender analysis, it included studying the distribution of beneficiaries by gender, age, education level, and governorate, in addition to distribution of projects by type and economic activity type. This analysis aims to understand the project's inclusivity and its ability to reach different target groups. It is important to note that some fields in the original data were empty, and these were handled in the analysis by excluding them from percentage calculations when needed, with indication in the results when appropriate. It should also be noted that this methodology relies entirely on the data provided in the survey, and therefore the results and recommendations will be limited by the scope and accuracy of this data.

The stages of preparing the final report were as follows:

- a. Collecting data about the project on the official electronic sites of the World Bank and the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity
- b. Analyzing documents and reports related to the project and all details related to its implementation
- c. Collecting data about the project's progress, effectiveness, and use of the complaint mechanism specified in the grant agreement
- d. Contacting the project implementation unit through correspondence to request an official interview to present the project and ways to cooperate for its implementation
- e. Contacting concerned entities such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Maritime Fishing to obtain data and information related to the implementation of project components, including support for small producers, promotion of rural entrepreneurship, and provision of job opportunities in rural areas by requesting access to information
- f. Preparing and distributing a "quantitative" survey on the extent to which the project's desired objectives were achieved
- g. Collecting qualitative data on the project's impact, with focus on success stories and challenges faced by beneficiaries

- h. Preparing a comprehensive report including analysis of beneficiary data, project evaluation, and recommendations to the World Bank and various stakeholders, and the extent to which objectives were achieved

5.2. Sample Profile and Characteristics

- **Gender:** 58.5% females, compared to 41.5% males
- **Average Age:** The most represented age group was 22-39 years at 55%, followed by the 39-58 age group at 35%
- **Education Level:** University level was highest at 51.5%, followed by secondary level at 35%
- **Project Categories:** 75.5% individual enterprises, compared to 12.5% for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and 12% for agricultural development associations (GDA)

5.3. Difficulties Faced by the Work Team

- Wide coverage area between different delegations and municipalities
- Difficulty obtaining beneficiaries' phone numbers and addresses
- Sometimes the project supervisor was unavailable

5.4. Survey Data Process Table

DATA CONTENT	AXIS
Sample	The sample consists of 40 beneficiaries contacted and surveyed, distributed as follows: - 10 beneficiaries from Gabes governorate - 15 beneficiaries from Kairouan governorate - 15 beneficiaries from Jendouba governorate
Main Survey Axes	A quantitative study conducted through a pilot survey based on random sampling and the nature of beneficiary delegations of the project. Control variables are: gender, age, and social class.
Persons of Interest	- Direct beneficiaries of the TRACE project - Indirect beneficiaries of the project - Regional officials of the TRACE project - Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (Gabes, Jendouba, and Kairouan)
Field Meeting Dates	Field meetings were conducted during: - 3 days in Jendouba governorate in October 14, 15, 21 2025 - 3 days in Kairouan governorate in October 22, 29 and November 05 2025 - 2 days in Gabes governorate in November 06, 07 2025
Information Collection Method	Data collection method: Conducted through face-to-face meetings by administering a survey in colloquial Arabic using paper and computer and photographing project samples
Information Collection Location	Governorates of Jendouba, Kairouan, and Gabes Official headquarters of the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity Union headquarters in Jendouba governorate Union headquarters in Kairouan governorate Union headquarters in Gabes governorate

The detailed analysis of the survey data, which included 40 beneficiaries of the TRACE project, reveals a set of important findings that paint a multidimensional picture of the beneficiaries' experience and the project's performance in the areas of governance, transparency, operational impact, and commitment to environmental and social standards. We will divide this analysis into several main axes to facilitate understanding of these results and extracting lessons from them.

6. Quantitative Survey Results

6.1. Access to Information and Transparency: Evaluation of Access Ease and Clarity of Communication

Easy access to information and transparency in procedures are cornerstones of any successful development project, as they ensure equal opportunity and build trust between project managers and beneficiaries. The survey focused on several aspects to evaluate these important axes.

Regarding how beneficiaries learned about the TRACE project, results showed that social media, especially Facebook, was the most common channel, with 43.3% of respondents mentioning it as their source of knowledge about the project. This was followed by "personal relationships" (such as a friend or official in the project) at 37.7%. Other sources like "radio, television or written press" were much less common. This distribution indicates that the project relied on unplanned "word of mouth" channels such as relationship networks to reach potential beneficiaries, in addition to the effectiveness of social media. These channels could be institutionalized in the future to allow all channels to be considered by the project and hence have the same intended objective.

Despite the success of these channels in reaching a large segment across a wide geographical area (including a high percentage of women and youth), given the number of participants in the project through registration on the official website of the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity, the heavy reliance on institutional and sometimes personal relationships may raise questions about the inclusivity of access and fairness of information distribution among all target groups without discrimination. Also, reliance on social media may exclude some beneficiaries who do not use these means. This explains the nature of the beneficiaries we met in the various governorates, who are mostly from categories able to use technological means easily.

The ease of access to information about the project was evaluated through the survey on a scale from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). Results were generally positive, with **33.3%** of respondents finding access to information "**easy**" and **56.5%** finding it "**very easy**". No beneficiary mentioned that access was "very difficult".

As for the clarity of documents provided to beneficiaries, results were also very positive, where 32 beneficiaries (**80%**) answered "**yes**" to the question "**Were the documents clear?**". This indicates that the majority of beneficiaries found the documents provided to them understandable and comprehensive.

The quality of accompaniment provided to beneficiaries when preparing their application files and obtaining financing was also evaluated. Results showed that **36 beneficiaries** (90%) received accompaniment "**very well**".

Overall, these indicators indicate that TRACE project implementers have performed well in terms of building a relationship of trust and follow-up with beneficiaries through phone follow-up and providing information to beneficiaries and guidance when necessary. For example, one beneficiary was guided to use natural biological tanning types, environmentally friendly, to enable her to produce "Haik"

instead of using manufactured tanning that is not environmentally friendly, emphasizing the need for improvement in ensuring environmental governance adoption and access to necessary information through more formal and balanced approaches to reduce reliance on self-directed approaches.

6.2. Complaint Management: Participation Mechanisms and Effectiveness in Handling

Complaint management mechanisms are an integral part of effective governance systems in any development project, as they provide a formal channel for beneficiaries to express concerns and report problems, thereby contributing to improved accountability and continuous correction of project performance.

The survey focused on evaluating beneficiaries' awareness of the existence of a complaint mechanism and their use of it.

Results showed that the vast majority of the sample interviewed was not aware of the importance of a formal complaint mechanism. Of the 40 beneficiaries, 38 indicated they had no knowledge of this mechanism and how it works, although this project has received and handled 25 official complaints. This may indicate that more efforts on communication around this important mechanism is needed in order to equip the project with a vital source of feedback from beneficiaries. Additionally, all forty respondents expressed that they did not use the complaint mechanism and did not submit any complaints, considering that they have nothing to complain about, as all their requests and inquiries pass through communication by phone or WhatsApp. This alternative form of two-way communication appears to have been more commonly used between beneficiaries and project staff.

Accordingly, these results call for reconsidering the communication strategy for the complaint mechanism. It is clear that merely having the mechanism is not enough; all project staff must be trained to introduce it to beneficiaries effectively and clearly in the early stages of their interaction with the project, while explaining how to use it and the guarantees in place to ensure confidentiality and fair handling.

The vast majority of beneficiaries' lack of awareness of the importance and role of a complaint mechanism means that there are problems or challenges they face and do not find a formal means to express them, which may negatively affect their overall satisfaction and project performance. Moreover, the absence of complaints from the sample of interviewed beneficiaries does not necessarily mean the absence of problems, but may be an indicator of not understanding the mechanism, fear of using it, or a cultural mistrust of such mechanisms.

For example, some project beneficiaries expressed their concern regarding long waiting periods, resulting from the delay in the process of purchasing their equipment, due to necessary procedures, complications, and difficulties, and sometimes bureaucracy outside the scope of the Solidarity Union. However, this did not prompt them to file a formal complaint.

Enhancing a culture of formally reporting problems and ensuring transparent and clear procedures for handling such complaints becomes vital for improving project governance and performance. These efforts must be accompanied by continuous awareness campaigns and clarification of practical steps for submitting complaints, while ensuring complete confidentiality and providing feedback to complainants about actions taken.

6.3. Operational Efficiency of Projects: Implementation, Challenges, and Economic Impact

Survey data reveal a complex and varied picture of the operational efficiency of projects supported by the TRACE project, through analyzing beneficiaries' ability to implement their plans, the difficulties they faced, and the economic impact in terms of job creation and financial profitability.

Regarding the extent to which beneficiaries were able to implement all planned project activities using available resources, results showed that **70.7%** of respondents were **able** to do so, while **20.3%** indicated they were **unable** to implement all activities. While the remaining 9 percent indicated that they were able to do so on conditions.

These results confirm the importance of continuous technical and administrative support for beneficiaries to face these difficulties, especially operational and marketing ones, to ensure their sustainability.

Regarding the economic impact of projects, results showed that **63.3%** of respondents were **able to create new jobs**, while **36.7%** indicated they **did not create new jobs**. It was noted that some of them improved their jobs and ensured their continuity, despite the challenging economic and climatic context that the Tunisian agricultural sector has faced in recent years, especially the small enterprises and professional groups that benefited from resources that enabled them to either improve production or service quality for small enterprises, or exploit them to provide additional activity that impacts the livelihood resources of group members. For example, 122 benefited from improved water quality for irrigation, while 23 beneficiaries of the TRACE project obtained better quality thanks to financing. These results are fully aligned with the project dual objective of creating jobs, while also enhancing food security and strengthening resilience among the most vulnerable.

As for the number of jobs created, 20 respondents answered between 1 and 5 jobs, with some of these project owners considering them permanent full-time jobs, while others considered market difficulties and the nature of work to make these new jobs seasonal or temporary. Beneficiaries also reported the existence of indirect jobs resulting from their projects that are difficult to estimate approximately.

When evaluating the financial profitability of projects after receiving the grant on a scale from 1 (weak return) to 5 (very good return), the evaluations were generally positive, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the financial profitability of supported projects.

Regarding grant coverage of expenses, **32 respondents (80%) answered that the grant did not cover all project expenses**, while the rest said it covered all expenses. These results confirm that the TRACE project has contributed positively to improving the financial performance of supported projects and creating jobs, despite the operational and marketing challenges faced by some projects and lack of full financing.

6.4. Commitment to Environmental and Social Standards: Awareness and Practice

Commitment to environmental and social standards is a vital aspect of sustainable development projects, and the TRACE project shows attention to this aspect, as evidenced by the existence of a "Cadre de Gestion Environnementale et Sociale" (CGES) that defines risks and necessary procedures. The survey focused on evaluating beneficiaries' awareness of these commitments and their practical applications.

First, regarding attendance at sessions introducing the environmental and social plan, results showed that 32 beneficiaries (80%) remember attending these sessions, while 8 beneficiaries (20%) did not. This indicates that the majority of beneficiaries were exposed to information about expected environmental and social commitments.

Second, when beneficiaries were asked whether the environmental and social commitments were clear to them, 86.7% answered "yes", while 13.3% answered "no". This confirms the effectiveness of the introductory sessions in clarifying these commitments to the majority of participants.

Third, the application of environmental and social practices during project implementation was evaluated in three main areas: waste management, conservation of natural resources, and employee health and safety, on an individual evaluation scale. Regarding waste management, the average rating was 4.05 (out of 5), indicating good application of these practices.

As for conservation of natural resources, the average rating was 4.93 (out of 5), which is a very positive indicator. Regarding employee health and safety, the average rating was 4.11, which is also a good evaluation.

In general, when beneficiaries were asked to describe their project's commitment to environmental and social aspects, the answers were positive. Of the 39 beneficiaries who answered this question, 32 described the commitment as "very good", 10 described it as "good", and 6 described it as "average". No beneficiary described the commitment as "weak" or "very weak".

Fourth, when beneficiaries were asked about measures they took to ensure environmental protection, many mentioned specific measures such as "recycling", "waste recycling", "composting", "fertilization", "conversion to fertilizer", "recycling and reusing", and "recycling and reusing organic materials into fertilizer". This demonstrates beneficiaries' awareness and practical application of environmentally friendly practices.

These results indicate that the TRACE project has been rather successful in disseminating awareness of environmental and social commitments and encouraging beneficiaries to apply them, reflecting the effectiveness of the CGES mechanism.

6.5. Project Distribution and Demographic Characteristics of Beneficiaries: Project Inclusivity

Analysis of project distribution and demographic characteristics of beneficiaries provides an important picture of the TRACE project's inclusivity and its ability to reach different target groups and regions.

Regarding the geographical distribution of beneficiaries within the target governorates, it was distributed in many regions without discrimination, and included villages and residential areas far from centers. This diversity indicates that the project's efforts have reached these targeted regions, which may be priorities in agricultural and rural development plans.

Regarding project type (Project Type), the vast majority of projects were individual enterprises (70%), according to the random sample, compared to 15.5% for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and 12.5% for agricultural development associations (GDA). This reflects the project's focus on supporting small individual initiatives.

As for the type of economic activity (Economic Activity Type), it was diverse, with prominent activities including:

- Poultry farming projects (5 projects)
- Beekeeping projects (4 projects)
- Oil distillation projects (3 projects)
- Traditional crafts projects (3 projects)
- "Processing industries" projects (8 projects)
- Agriculture projects (6 projects)
- In addition to other activities such as "services" and "e-commerce"

Regarding the demographic characteristics of beneficiaries, results showed a female advantage over males. Of the 40 beneficiaries, 27 were women (67.5%), compared to 13 men (32.5%). This indicates the project's success in reaching rural women and empowering them economically.

Regarding age, the most represented age group was 36-50 years with 18 beneficiaries (45%), followed by the 18-35 age group with 14 beneficiaries (35%). As for education level, the highest representation was university level with 23 beneficiaries (57.5%), followed by secondary level with 10 beneficiaries (25%).

This distribution indicates that the project succeeded in attracting women, youth, and higher education holders, which may reflect the nature of the supported projects that require a certain level of education, planning, and ability to absorb training courses.

6.6. Women's Empowerment in Rural Projects

The TRACE project stands out as an effective tool for economically empowering women in rural areas of Tunisia. Survey data indicate wide participation of women as managers of supported projects, with women (67.5%) of the beneficiaries. This high percentage reflects the project's commitment to gender equality and its ability to reach the female category and encourage entrepreneurial initiatives.

Women's projects vary between agricultural, animal, industrial, processing, and service activities, indicating the project's flexibility in accommodating different types of women's initiatives. For example, we find projects for women in areas such as wool tanning and rural "Haik" production, poultry farming, cheese making, drying and processing agricultural materials, oil distillation, e-commerce, and others.

Despite this positive representation among the project beneficiaries who received technical and financial support, deeper analysis of the data may reveal structural challenges that rural women regularly face. For example, access to financing and resources may be more difficult for women, and they may face cultural and social challenges that limit their full participation in economic activities. Although the current survey does not provide direct data on these challenges, attention to studying them in the future can help design more effective projects to support rural women. Additionally, tracking the long-term impact of these projects on women's social and economic empowerment and

improving their status within their local communities is extremely important for evaluating the project's success in achieving its comprehensive development goals.

7. Qualitative Survey Results with Non-Beneficiaries of the TRACE Project

A qualitative survey was conducted including five applicants who did not benefit from the "TRACE" project for support and assistance. The survey focused on understanding their experiences and observations regarding the application process and acceptance criteria, especially after four of them completed all required training stages, but three of these four had their projects rejected in the end. Three of these four submitted complaints through direct email correspondence to the World Bank in Tunisia on May 22, 2022. According to them, they also contacted the governor of the region to register their complaint.

- **Main reasons for complaints according to interviewees:**

Frustration from wasted time and effort: Applicants of the first cohort expressed extreme frustration from the rejection of their files after first being accepted and benefiting from intensive training sessions, only to have their projects rejected in the end. They considered this a waste of their precious time and efforts made in good faith. The project initially aimed through its first cohort to enroll the maximum number of beneficiaries in its technical assistance to build their technical and managerial capacity; however, unfortunately without accessing financial support after the technical assistance, this was perceived as a waste of time by many candidates. This was a lesson learnt for the project and the procedures were changed for the second and third cohorts.

Application of arbitrary and unclear rejection criterion: The criterion of rejecting projects on the pretext that their owners had benefited from other support projects caused great resentment. Applicants explained that this condition was not clearly mentioned from the beginning of the application, which they considered arbitrary in applying criteria and a lack of transparency.

Doubt about the integrity of the selection process: The presence of the wife of one of the project selection committee members among the applicants raised doubts among participants about the integrity of the process. Despite the project acting and removing the mentioned family member after candidates protested, applicants considered this a serious violation of the principle of neutrality and fairness, affecting their confidence in the entire competition. We note this observation according to what three rejected participants said, but we found no material evidence of this violation.

- **Positions of rejected non-complainants:**

Data indicated that two of the applicants whose files were rejected did not submit formal complaints. For one, the reason was lack of conviction in the effectiveness of the complaint mechanism followed, while the second was convinced by the legal justifications provided for rejecting his project.

- **Collective complaints and general observations:**

Available data revealed the existence of a collective complaint from **13 project applicants** to the governor of the region, as a result of their observation of fundamental flaws in the project acceptance process. Flaws were also noted in organizing the final selection process, including granting some applicants additional deadlines to complete their files (work plans and financial studies) without others, causing delays for the entire group. In a later development, 13 applicants objected to the final results and demanded reconsideration of the selection, calling for the formation of a national arbitration committee to replace the regional committee.

The results of this qualitative survey reveal the existence of fundamental challenges in the application and acceptance process for the first cohort of the TRACE project, represented by a lack of transparency in criteria, which raised questions about the integrity of the selection process, and irregularity in administrative procedures. These factors collectively contributed to provoking applicants and undermining their confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of the project. This is what happened in the first phase of the project, which the second phase tried to address through effective communication and documentation of all correspondence and complaints according to what they reported.

8. Recommendations: Towards Enhancing TRACE Project's Governance and Impact

Based on the detailed analysis of survey results, a set of key observations and practical recommendations can be extracted that aim to enhance TRACE project governance and increase effectiveness and development impact, or in similar projects. These recommendations focus on aspects where data, analyses, and dialogues have shown challenges or opportunities for improvement.

- **Strengthening information access mechanisms and transparency:**

Despite the positive evaluation of beneficiaries' ease of access to information, clarity of documents, and quality of accompaniment, there is room for improving the project's transparency and procedures. The heavy reliance on "institutional network" as a source of information about the project (36.7%) raises questions about equal opportunity. Therefore, we recommend:

Diversifying and strengthening official communication channels: The project should develop and activate multiple official communication channels (such as traditional media, especially local radio stations, websites, newsletters, partnerships with local associations) to announce the project, its conditions, and procedures, with the aim of reducing reliance on informal channels and ensuring information reaches all target groups with fairness and transparency.

- **Ensuring continuity of accompaniment quality:**

Given the very high evaluation of accompaniment quality (average 4.81/5), this level should be maintained and generalized to all beneficiaries, while ensuring technical and administrative support is provided throughout the project implementation period and beyond, and finding mechanisms to assist in product identification and marketing, given the difficulties of the economic climate that directly affects the sustainability of projects. "Some beneficiaries requested accompaniment for 5 years."

Given the time-bound nature of development projects, state agencies should play a role in providing this long-term support.

- **Activating the complaint management mechanism:**

Data shows a significant "reluctance" to use the complaint management mechanism, as 93.3% of beneficiaries did not have clear knowledge of this mechanism, which indicates ineffective communication around this mechanism, making it unable to perform its function as a tool for correction and improvement. Therefore, we recommend:

- **Organizing intensive awareness campaigns:** Launch continuous and intensive awareness campaigns for all beneficiaries (current and potential) about the complaint mechanism, how to submit complaints, and existing guarantees (such as confidentiality, fair handling, and specified response time). Different communication means (meetings, publications, videos) can be used for this purpose.
- **Simplifying complaint submission procedures:** Ensure that complaint submission procedures are easy, clear, and accessible to all, with multiple options for submitting complaints (written, electronic, telephone) to suit different beneficiary circumstances.

- **Strengthening commitment to environmental and social standards:**

Data showed positive commitment from beneficiaries to environmental and social standards, with high average ratings in waste management (4.03/5), conservation of natural resources (4.39/5), and health and safety (4.11/5). Therefore, we recommend:

- Enhancing continuous training: Continue organizing periodic workshops on best environmental and social practices, with focus on high-risk sectors such as poultry farming and food processing.
- Establishing an incentive system: Provide symbolic rewards or certificates of appreciation for projects distinguished in applying environmental and social standards.
- Developing specialized guides: Design practical guides classified by activity type (agriculture, traditional crafts, services) to simplify application of standards.

- **Improving project distribution, inclusivity, and social gender:**

Given the focus on individual projects (90%), which limits collective impact, we recommend:

- Expanding geographical scope: Adding new governorates with development priorities such as: Kef, Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid.
- Allocating support for collective projects: Dedicate 20% of financing to cooperative projects and collective SMEs to enhance community economic impact.
- Women's empowerment projects: Providing business incubators specifically for rural women with logistical services during training.

Conclusion

The "Economic Recovery Support and Job Creation in the Agricultural Food Sector and Rural Areas in Tunisia" (TRACE) project has proven to be a vital and effective development tool, particularly in its efforts to reach target groups, especially rural women. The detailed analysis of survey data, which included 40 beneficiaries in the governorates of Jendouba, Kairouan, and Gabes, has revealed clear successes and opportunities for improvement, painting a clear path to enhance project governance and sustainable impact.

The TRACE project has enormous potential to become a model for rural development. Through survey analysis, we have identified lessons learned that can be transformed into starting points toward better governance in implementation:

Activating a culture of accountability: Intensive awareness campaigns about the complaint mechanism must be launched, emphasizing confidentiality and simplifying submission procedures. Beneficiaries' full knowledge of the complaint mechanism and their confidence in its effectiveness constitute a fundamental indicator of the health of the project's governance system.

- **Expanding inclusivity and impact:** Allocating part of the financing (20%) to support collective and cooperative projects and small and medium enterprises, in addition to expanding the geographical scope to include new governorates with development priorities, to enhance community economic impact.
- **Sustainability through accompaniment:** Ensuring continuity of accompaniment quality and providing necessary technical and administrative support even after the implementation period, with finding mechanisms to assist in product identification and marketing to ensure project sustainability despite economic climate difficulties.
- **Civil society:** Despite the participatory nature that characterized the involvement of administrations in all stages of project implementation in the three governorates, we emphasize in our report providing space for civil society institutions, especially those working in the areas covered by the project, to participate in monitoring all stages and activities, especially to ensure more representation of target groups.

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