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Women's development organisations in rural areas of Tunisia: rethinking support to strengthen their autonomy

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Abstract – Women's development organisations in rural areas of Tunisia were first created in the early 2010s, since when their number has increased steadily. These organisations have received wide-ranging support from public and non-governmental development actors, which has helped them develop but has also compromised their autonomy, *i.e.* their capacity to fix objectives on their own and to contact other actors only when needed to achieve their objectives. The present study analyses the development trajectory and autonomy of women's development organisations in Siliana Governorate. Most of the activities of the nine organisations studied concern the collective production and marketing of a variety of products related to animal breeding, food, and handicrafts. Since their creation, most organisations have increased their number of members and their range of activities. In a workshop in which presidents of these organisations, their members, and administrative support staff took part, participants pointed out that the members' technical and management skills, their willingness and ability to organise collective action play a key role in ensuring the autonomy of the organisations. Analysing the autonomy of women's development organisations – particularly in close collaboration with their members – is a complementary approach to the one focused on solving the often-material constraints that hamper their development. This complementary approach will help focus on how to strengthen their capacity to be in the driver's seat in defining their goals and strategies and to become fully-fledged partners of support organisations.

Keywords: Autonomous organisations / income generation / Tunisia / rural women's organisations

Résumé – **Groupements féminins de développement dans les zones rurales de la Tunisie : Repenser l'appui pour renforcer leur autonomie.** Les organisations féminines de développement dans les zones rurales de Tunisie ont été créées au début des années 2010 et leur nombre n'a cessé d'augmenter depuis. Ces organisations ont bénéficié d'un large soutien de la part des acteurs de développement publics et non-gouvernementaux. Cela les a aidées à se développer mais a également pu fragiliser leur autonomie, c'est-à-dire leur capacité à fixer leurs propres objectifs et à ne contacter d'autres acteurs que lorsque cela est nécessaire pour atteindre leurs objectifs. La présente étude analyse la trajectoire de développement et l'autonomie d'organisations féminines de développement dans le gouvernorat de Siliana. Les activités des neuf organisations étudiées sont principalement liées à la production collective et à la commercialisation d'une variété de produits liés à l'élevage, à l'alimentation et à l'artisanat. La plupart des organisations ont augmenté leur nombre de membres et l'étendue de leurs activités depuis leur création. Lors d'un atelier réunissant les présidentes de ces organisations, les membres et le personnel des administrations d'appui, les participants ont souligné que les compétences techniques et de gestion des membres, ainsi que la volonté et la capacité des membres à organiser des actions collectives, sont essentielles pour atteindre l'autonomie de ces organisations. Analyser l'autonomie des organisations féminines de développement – et surtout le faire avec leurs membres – peut fournir une approche complémentaire à celle qui se concentre sur la résolution des contraintes, souvent matérielles, qui entravent leur développement. Cette approche complémentaire peut aider à se concentrer explicitement sur la manière de renforcer leur capacité à être aux commandes pour la définition de leurs objectifs et leurs stratégies, et ainsi à devenir des partenaires à part entière des organisations d'appui.

Mots clés : Organisation autonome / Création de revenu / Tunisie / Organisation féminine rurale

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1 Introduction

In Tunisia, policies supporting women's living conditions have been the subject of considerable interest since Independence. Past policies mostly focused on social dimensions, *e.g.* family rights, access to education and maternal health (Ferrerias Carreras *et al.*, 2021), and until the 2010s, less attention was paid to women's economic empowerment, particularly in rural areas. Only 20% of rural women have their own source of income (Gueddana, 2021), and Tunisian women face many challenges to being formally involved in the agricultural sector including access to education and information, social protection, productive resources (*e.g.* land), markets, financial services and technology (Ferrerias Carreras *et al.*, 2021).

The 2011 revolution raised general expectations that the democratic transition would be inclusive. A series of plans were enacted with ambitious goals concerning the socioeconomic empowerment of women in rural areas (Ministère de la Femme, de la Famille et de l'Enfance, 2017; CIHEAM-UfM, 2018; OCDE *et al.*, 2020). Public organisations that deal with this issue were strengthened. One such organisation is the Rural Women's Office (created in 2001), which is part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Hydraulic Resources and Fisheries. This office now has a representative in each regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture, and Tunisian women's socioeconomic empowerment also moved up on the agenda of international donors in the 2010s (Gribaa and Depaoli, 2014). A key component of the initiatives taken by Tunisian public administrations in this domain, often in collaboration with international donors, has been the creation of women's development organisations.

Most of the women's development organisations created are agricultural development groups, which are the most common form of local development organisation in rural Tunisia. Agricultural development groups are associations that undertake a variety of activities, either providing services to their members or collective actions undertaken by members. In 2022, 2700 agricultural development groups were in charge of managing irrigation schemes and/or drinking water networks (Rural Women's Support Office, pers. comm., December 2023). Approximately 670 other groups were involved in the production and marketing of mostly agricultural products, but also to a lesser extent, forestry and fisheries products. In 2022, there were also 340 mutual agricultural service companies, which, in practice, function as cooperatives (Belhaj Rhouma, 2018). Their activities include the collection of agricultural products from members and the processing and marketing of these products in value chains, for example, the dairy and tomato value chains (Soethoudt *et al.*, 2018; Ammari and Rimaoui, 2022). Mutual companies are usually much larger than agricultural development groups, both in the number of members and their budget. However, unless the groups and mutual companies are not specifically focussed on women, women usually only account for a small minority of the members, as the male heads of rural households are usually officially in charge of agricultural activities. Women are almost never on the managing committees of these organisations (Ben Mustapha Jacox, 2016; Najah, 2021).

To promote the socioeconomic empowerment of rural women, the Rural Women's Office consequently decided to create development organisations that would only be composed of women. The first Women's Agricultural Development Group (WADG) was created in 2011. Their number then rapidly increased to reach 164 in 2022, with a total of more than 5000 members. Fourteen more women's mutual companies have been created by 2022 (Rural Women's Support Office, pers. comm.). However, few studies have been conducted on WADGs in Tunisia and those that have mostly focused on one particular case (Gana, 2013; Labiadh, 2014).

Women in rural areas of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (hereafter North Africa) are subject to similar socioeconomic conditions. Initiatives to support the creation of women's development organisations have also emerged in rural areas of Morocco and Algeria in recent decades. In the three countries, support mainly came from public administrations or international donors (Montanari and Bergh, 2019; Hamamouche *et al.*, 2023), who sometimes helped local initiatives but also often took the initiative of creating organisations. Such support can have different effects. On the one hand, it can provide meaningful assistance for the creation of the organisations and help obtain the equipment and the production, marketing and management skills they require. On the other hand, external support does not necessarily focus on supporting the autonomy of organisations and may even undermine it.

According to Hamamouche *et al.* (2023), autonomy is the capacity of an organisation to define goals on its own, and then, if needed, to look for support to achieve their chosen goals. Indeed, external support may lead to situations whereby the objectives and strategies are defined by external stakeholders and not by the members of the organisations themselves (Elbehri and Lee, 2011). In such cases, community-based organisations and farmers' organisations are often unstable and find it difficult to develop (Shah, 1996). External support may thus help local development organisations overcome short-term issues, but for the latter to be able to evolve and flourish in the longer term, attention needs to be paid to understanding their degree of autonomy, so as to foster it or at least to avoid weakening it.

Paying attention to the autonomy of women's rural development organisations in North Africa is thus important if the latter are to play a significant role in improving the living conditions of their members. However, to date, no studies have focussed on the autonomy of these organisations. To help fill this gap, the present study analyses the development trajectory and autonomy of WADGs in the Siliana Governorate in Tunisia. Several studies have been conducted on the impact of women's organisations on the empowerment of members as individuals (*e.g.*, Baden, 2013). The focus of the present paper differs in that it focuses on the autonomy of women's organisations *per se*, *i.e.*, on the collective. An organisation that has achieved autonomy does not mean it remains isolated from support organisations, particularly in terms of funding, but that it is able to manage the relationship proactively, *i.e.* exerting collective agency over support organisations. In this definition of autonomy, managing the relation with external actors is not a goal *per se*, as argued in studies inspired by

Resource Dependence Theory (Arhin *et al.*, 2018), but rather a means to achieve goals that have already been defined within the organisation itself (Baron and Hattab-Christmann, 2005). The degree of autonomy does not necessarily equate with performance, as a WADG may perform well, but may be doing so only thanks to continuous support from development actors. In the present paper, we do not analyse relationships between members of such organisations nor the impact these organisations have on women's empowerment as individuals.

Even though there has been no study of the autonomy of women's development organisations in rural areas of North Africa, a series of studies has been conducted on these organisations' trajectories, the support they receive, their actions, and the constraints they face. These elements enable a general understanding, based on which the autonomy of these organisations can then be analysed. Hereafter, we first present a review of these studies followed by a description of the method we used and the results we obtained in the Siliana Governorate of Tunisia. The discussion section highlights the benefits of using an analytical approach focusing on the autonomy of women's development groups and the need to rethink support to more explicitly focus on how to strengthen their autonomy.

2 Diversity of women's development organisations in rural areas of North Africa

Here, we review studies of women's development organisations in rural areas of North Africa. These organisations are hereafter understood as organisations that only have women members (there are a few mixed gender cooperatives in Morocco). In Morocco, the main public programmes that have supported women's development organisations over the past 15 years are the National Initiative for Human Development and, to a lesser extent, the Green Morocco Plan (2006–2020) (Benkhallouk, 2020). In 2022, there were over 7000 women's cooperatives in Morocco, the vast majority located in rural areas (ODCO, 2023). In Morocco, in some of these women's cooperatives (which, officially, only have women members), in practice, men are involved, for example in dealing with administrative issues when the women members are illiterate (Lebdaoui, 2021 and 2022).

In Algeria, policies to enhance the socio-economic status of women were rare in the decades following Independence in 1962, particularly in rural areas (Hélie-Lucas, 1985). It was not until the 2000s that public policies actually supported the creation of women's associations. According to data published by the Algerian Ministry of the Interior (last accessed in March 2024), the number of local women's associations increased from around 700 in 2010 to over 1800 in 2024. Nevertheless, women's associations account for less than 2% of the total number of local associations (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). In rural areas, where women live in much more difficult socio-economic circumstances than in urban areas, specific programmes have been created to improve their conditions and give them more opportunities for empowerment, for example, the joint programme for gender equality and women's empowerment (2009–2011). These programmes received support from non-governmental and international

cooperation initiatives aimed at strengthening women's associations in rural areas (Thieux, 2010; Bocretouai, 2019).

Women's development organisations in rural areas of North Africa vary their activities to compensate for the fact that women generally do not have direct access to land. Their activities can be grouped in three categories. First, harvesting and processing natural products, such as aromatic and medicinal plants (Labiadh, 2014). Second, providing support for the production – generally at household level – of animal products including poultry, milk, or honey (Faysse *et al.*, 2015). Third, the preparation of food products, *e.g.*, couscous or jam (Faysse *et al.*, 2015). In the whole of North Africa, the sector in which women's organisations are the most structured is argan oil in Morocco (Romagny *et al.*, 2016; Montanari *et al.*, 2023), which involves 400 women's cooperatives grouped in economic interest groups, while a union of women's cooperatives is responsible for the production and marketing of the argan oil (Benbihi, 2021). In Algeria, the El Mechaal association is one of the leading rural women's organisations and is particularly active in the exploitation and development of forestry resources throughout Algeria; it has 950 members in all (Brisin and Zaouila, 2019).

Many of these women's development organisations have proved their capacity not only to pursue their activities but also to evolve. However, they face several constraints. First, studies often mention lack of training and lack of access to funding (Tribak and Rguig, 2021). A study of women's associations in western regions of Algeria revealed a number of problems that hamper the activities of these associations including lack of financial, material and human resources (Thieux, 2010). Second, marketing problems are often mentioned in both Morocco (Benkhallouk, 2020; Montanari *et al.*, 2023) and Tunisia (Pontiggia *et al.*, 2022). When women's organisations function in niche sectors, they may have to compete for a market for their products. In sectors that are more structured, as is the case of argan oil production, the groups face strong competition from the private sector (Romagny *et al.*, 2016). Third, governance problems are reported. For instance, in several cases, the presidents already had the necessary management skills and networking capacities but grassroots members lacked the confidence and self-esteem required to become involved in the management of the association (Tribak and Rguig, 2021). This led to power asymmetries and sometimes to conflicts (Igamane, 2020). In the absence of specific actions designed to overcome differences in skills, grassroots members tended to be excluded from management and these differences in skills increased as the associations grew (Faysse *et al.*, 2015; Igamane, 2020). Taken together, these studies make similar assessments of the constraints faced by women's development organisations in rural areas of North Africa.

3 Study method

In Siliana Governorate in Tunisia, 18 WADGs were created between 2012 and 2023. However, in 2023, seven were no longer operating, and two that were created in 2022 were not yet operational. Two women's mutual companies had also been created in the governorate but, in 2023, were not yet

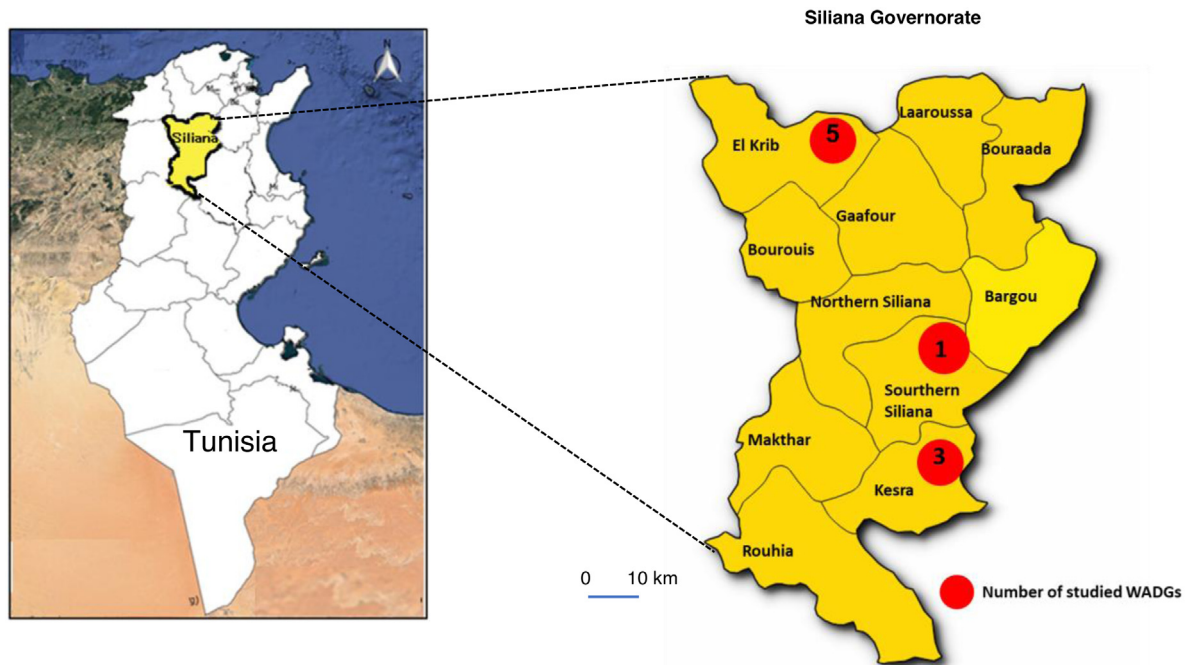


Fig. 1. Location of the women's agricultural development groups studied.

Fig. 1. Localisation des groupements féminins de développement agricole étudiés.

active. In the present study, we consequently focus on the nine operational WADGs (Fig. 1 and Tab. 1).

Data were collected in two stages. In the first stage, in May 2023, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the presidents – all women – of the management committees of the nine WADGs on the premises of these groups. The interviewees were first asked to describe the creation of their organisations and in particular, to say who took the initiative for their creation. Second, they were asked to describe their activities and the type of support they had received, both during the creation and since. Third, they were asked to identify the main constraints their organisations faced. In addition to the interviews, we met the staff members of the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture involved in supporting the WADGs in their own office to identify the development trajectory and constraints facing these groups.

In the second stage, in December 2023, a workshop was held involving seven presidents of WADGs who had been already interviewed during the first stage, six members of the WADGs, and six members of the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture staff involved in supporting these groups.

Participants were first informed of and discussed the preliminary results of the first stage of the study. The participants were then divided into three groups: a group of presidents, a group of members, and a group of staff members of the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture. In each group, the participants were asked to list the constraints faced by WADGs. To rank their constraints according to their importance, participants considered each pair of constraints on the list and decided which of the two was more important. The constraints were then ranked according to the number of times they had been cited as being more important in each of these pairwise comparisons. Second, facilitators presented the above-mentioned definition of the autonomy of WADGs,

i.e. the capacity of a group to set objectives on their own and to look for support only inasmuch as it served these objectives. Participants in each group were invited to provide a more detailed definition of what the autonomy of a WADG meant for them. They then classified each of the WADGs they knew about as having either limited, average, or advanced autonomy. By comparing WADGs with differing levels of autonomy, participants identified the factors that enhance the autonomy of these groups.

When the members and presidents of the WADG discussed the constraints facing WADGs and their autonomy in small groups, the participants' discourse may have been "strategic" *i.e.* not reflect their real opinion as they knew that the results of their discussion would be presented in a plenary session. However, in reality, the risk of bias was limited: firstly, the workshop was presented as part of a research project, *i.e.*, it would have no impact on decision-making by support institutions. Secondly, most of the output of the discussion concerned all the WADGs, not one in particular. The main exception was the ranking of WADGs. However, this ranking was actually used mainly as a basis for identifying the factors that supported WADG autonomy. Finally, in December 2023, an interview was conducted with the chief of the Rural Women's Support Headquarters in Tunis, to discuss ongoing policies aimed at supporting WADGs.

4 Results

4.1 Trajectory and functioning of the WADGs

4.1.1 Creation of the groups

WADGs emerged from the initiatives of several actors (Tab. 1). The regional Rural Women's Office in Siliana Governorate was behind the creation of five of them. To give

Table 1. Creation of Women Agricultural Development Groups.**Tableau 1.** Création des Groupements de développement agricole féminins.

Women Agricultural Development Group	District	Year of creation	Number of members at creation	Number of members in 2023	Initiative of Creation		
					Members	Rural Women Office	Other development actors
El Amal	Kesra	2012	4	40		X	
Zidi Kesra	Kesra	2012	30	300		X	
El Wifak	Kesra	2017	5	25	X	X	X
Nour	El Krib	2017	7	36		X	
Dar Mhannya	El Krib	2017	100	260		X	
Borj Massoudi	El Krib	2019	20	55	X		
El Hayet	El Krib	2021	16	16	X		
El Kadihat	El Krib	2021	50	50	X		
Hrayer Sidi Hmada	South Siliana	2022	30	36		X	

Table 2. Sources of income of Women Agricultural Development Groups.**Tableau 2.** Sources de revenus des Groupements de développement agricole féminins.

WADG	Animal breeding			Local food products	Handicrafts	Collection and distillation of medicinal and aromatic plants	Olive tree pruning
	Sheep fattening	Bee-keeping	Chicken				
El Amal	Cre						
Zidi Kesra		P-DG		Cre	P-DG		
El Wifak				P-DG	Cre		
Nour		Cre		P-DG		Dev	
Dar Mhannya				P-DG		Cre	P-DG
Borj Massoudi		Cre	Dev	Cre			
El Hayet	Dev	Cre					P-DG
El Kadihat			Dev		Cre		
Hrayer Sidi Hmada			Dev	Cre	Cre	Cre	

Cre: activity underway since the creation of the WADG; P-DG: activity launched after creation, on the initiative of the WADG; Dev: initiated after creation at the initiative of development actors.

an example of how this could happen, several women in Zidi Kesra used to get together informally to make jam and do handicrafts. The head of the Rural Women's Office took the initiative to create a WADG grouping these women. As she explained: "When we created Zidi Kesra WADG, we had three aims: to structure the production and marketing of our products, to increase the know-how of rural women in Zidi Kesra District, and to promote Zidi Kesra figs, because they're good food". In three other WADGs, women who were already producing products on their own saw the advantage of collective organisation and themselves created a group. The president of Borj Massoudi WADG told us: "Our region is famous for all its different products, and the women are really enthusiastic. In the past, we didn't have any real means of production and we weren't able to sell our products ourselves at trade fairs. So we took a training course on the management of agricultural development groups organised by the members

of Nour WADG. After that course, I talked to my neighbours and suggested we start a WADG to increase the value of our products and to apply our new skills." El Wifak WADG was the result of a joint initiative of members and support actors.

In six of the WADGs, the number of members increased significantly following their creation. One explanation was that they needed to meet the expectations of the donors who wanted to reach a high number of beneficiaries. Another was diversifying the activities of the WADGs, either on the initiative of the group itself or triggered by support from development actors. These WADGs invited women to become members to get involved in new activities.

4.1.2 Functioning

The WADGs we studied have a wide range of sources of income (Tab. 2). Some groups collect and distil natural

Table 3. Activities undertaken by Womens' Agricultural Development Groups.**Tableau 3.** Activités entreprises par les Groupements de développement agricole féminins.

WADG	Collective production	Acquisition of equipment and inputs	Capacity building of members with regards to production	Capacity building of member on other topics	Marketing		
					By members	In fairs	Collective sales at the group premises
El Amal		X			X		
Zidi Kesra	X	X	X	X		X	X
El Wifak	X	X	X			X	X
Nour	X	X	X			X	X
Dar Mhannya	X	X	X	X		X	X
Borj Massoudi	X	X	X			X	
El Hayet	X		X	X		X	
El Kadihat	X	X					X
Hrayer Sidi Hmada	X	X				X	

aromatic and medicinal plants such as rosemary and thyme. Other groups raise animals, usually at each member's own home. In the case of bee keeping, each member has her own beehives, whereas packaging and marketing are done collectively. Third, some groups produce the ingredients needed for traditional dishes usually made on the premises of the WADG, such as *couscous*, *bsissa* (a traditional Mediterranean food made from roast cereals mixed with spices), *mloukhia* (a soup made from the leaves of jute mallow) or *chorba* (a traditional vegetable and meat soup). Fourth, some groups produce handmade cushions, carpets, tables and chairs. Finally, two groups answer calls for tenders for olive tree pruning on land managed by state farms, thanks to support from the National Handicraft Office. When the two groups are selected to prune the trees, they occasionally hire women and men who are not members of their group to boost their workforce. Most of the WADGs did not start all their current activities when the group was first formed, rather, they progressively increased the range of activities, either on their own initiative or following suggestions from support actors (Tab. 2).

The WADGs also differ considerably in the types of activities they undertake collectively (Tab. 3). The El Amal WADG only has a few activities and is not involved in collective production and marketing. Originally, its role was organising the distribution of sheep to women beneficiaries; the women then fattened the sheep and sold them on their own. Since then, this WADG has mainly functioned as an intermediary between members and support actors, for example, when subsidised fodder is distributed. By contrast, other WADGs are involved in the different stages of production and marketing of products.

With the exception of El Hayet WADG, all the WADGs supply their members with raw materials and facilitate access to production equipment. Some production activities are always carried out collectively. This is the case of cooking the local dishes, distilling the medicinal and aromatic plants, using the egg incubators in poultry farming, and handicrafts. In addition, several WADGs are involved in capacity building of their members. Five WADGs act as intermediaries between

their members and an external organisation that provides capacity building (for instance, an administrative entity or the supplier of distillery equipment). The president of El Wifak WADG herself trains women in her village in handicrafts with the aim of increasing the number of members of the group. Some WADGs occasionally provide training and advisory services on topics not directly related to their own product. For instance, Zidi Kesra WADG offers training on irrigation and agro-ecology with the support of the public olive bureau.

Several marketing channels are available. Marketing can be done by individual members independently of the WADG, which is the case of the El Amal group. A second distribution channel is trade fairs, which are usually organised by the administration. The group sends one member to the trade fair to sell products made by all the members. Direct collective sales are another channel. Zidi Kesra and Hrayer Sidi Hmada WADGs do collective on-site marketing to benefit from the passage of tourists. The president of El Hayet WADG allows the members to deposit the honey they want to sell on her personal premises, because this group does not do collective marketing. Finally, four WADGs have started distance sales, either by phone or using social media, notably their Facebook pages, or the group's own website.

4.1.3 Support

Since their creation, the WADGs have benefited from support from a large number of actors (Tab. 4) including several public administrations that belong to the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Women, and the Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts, as well as international donors (*e.g.*, IFAD) or actors involved in bilateral cooperation (*e.g.*, GIZ).

The Rural Women's Office is a key player in the coordination of almost all activities undertaken by public administrations and other development organisations to support WADGs. The Office provides initial support to WADGs and assists them with management. However, it has very little core funding for the purchase of equipment, and instead focuses on actions to strengthen production skills (*e.g.* beekeeping or poultry farming) and management skills.

Table 4. External support provided to Womens' Agricultural Development Groups.**Tableau 4.** Soutien extérieur aux Groupements de développement agricole féminins.

WADG	Support from creation to 2021			Support in 2022 and 2023		
	Production equipment supply	Marketing	Capacity building	Supply of production equipment	Marketing	Capacity Building
El Amal			X	X		X
El Wifak			X	X	X	X
Zidi Kesra, Nour	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dar Mhannya, Borj Massoudi		X	X	X	X	X
El Hayet		X	X			
El Kadihat	X		X	X		X
Hrayer Sidi Hmada	na	na	na	X	X	X

na: non applicable

Table 5. Constraints according to workshop participants (ranked by decreasing role of importance).**Tableau 5.** Contraintes selon les participants à l'atelier (classées par ordre décroissant d'importance).

Members of WADGs	Presidents of WADGs	Administration staff members
Lack of collective premises	Lack of financial means	Inadequate legal framework
Lack of financial means	Costs of analysis of food content and costs of materials for packaging	Lack of financial means
Inadequate legal framework	Rising price of primary material	Insufficient skills of the management committee
Lack of equipment for production and packaging	Marketing	Lack of equipment for production and packaging
Insufficient skills of the management committee	Limited membership	

Table 4 shows that all WADGs initially benefited from capacity building for production and management, and most continued to benefit from such activities more recently. Support involving the provision of production equipment concerned more WADGs in 2022 and 2023 than previously. This is mostly due to a marked increase in the presence of development actors and programmes involved in the empowerment of rural women today compared with in the 2010s. The Ministry of Agriculture provided financial support for the participation of WADG members in trade fairs up until 2019 when trade fairs stopped due to the Covid pandemic. After the pandemic ended, the Ministry of Agriculture continued to finance the transport of WADG products to the fairs, but no longer paid for the transport of the members. In 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture created a permanent national store in Tunis for WADG products.

4.1.4 Constraints

Participants in the workshop ranked the lack of financial means as a major constraint for WADGs (Tab. 5). The presidents argued that the lack of financial resources is an obstacle to the development of the activities of the groups. For instance, to be able to sell their products in good condition, WADGs need equipment to produce proper packaging, good quality materials and, for food products, the ingredients have to be analysed. The presidents also mentioned the increasing price of primary materials due to climate change and increased packaging costs along with marketing problems. The president of Zidi Kesra WADG said: "The members don't want to only

sell their products at trade fairs, they also want to sell them in supermarkets. However, we don't have the financial means to perform quality analyses and expand our marketing network. Likewise, we don't have the right kind of premises to receive customers or donors, and to discuss opportunities".

Members of the staff of public administrations mentioned the problem of the legal framework. Tunisian Law No. 2004-24 prevents agricultural development groups from distributing any profits to their members. Money from sales can only be used to pay running costs and any profits have to be reinvested. In practice, profits are often distributed but there is no clear rule on how much to distribute and how much to invest, leading to frequent conflicts. Moreover, the Nour, Dar Mhannya and Hrayer Sidi Hmada WADGs, who organise the collection and distilling of medicinal and aromatic plants, cannot submit tenders to obtain the right to collect products from public forests. Several members mentioned the lack of premises as the main constraint. Indeed, only one WADG had suitable premises. In four cases, the women meet in a room in a private house, meaning the members do not feel free to use the room whenever they wish. In three cases, the premises are too small to diversify, to produce and store materials, or to receive visitors. El Amal WADG has no office at all.

The fact members of the management committee lack sufficient skills was also frequently mentioned as a constraint. The president of one WADG told us: "In fact, the first general meeting was organised by the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture. Since then we simply haven't held any meetings. I'm not familiar with the administrative procedures. Neither I nor my colleagues know how to write up the minutes of meetings".

Table 6. Different views on the WADGs levels of autonomy.**Tableau 6.** Différents points de vue sur l'autonomie des groupements féminins.

Viewpoints	WADGs with limited autonomy	WADGs with medium autonomy	Autonomous WADGs
Staff from the administration	Amal, Hrayer Sidi Hmada	Borj El Massoudi, El Kadihat El Hayet	Zidi Kesra, El Wifak Nour, Dar Mhannya
WADG presidents	El Hayet Hrayer Sidi Hmada	Zidi Kesra, Borj El Massoudi El Kadihat, El Wifak	
WADG members		El Hayet, Hrayer Sidi Hmada	El Kadihat, Nour, Borj Massoudi, El Wifak

Finally, participants in all the groups mentioned the lack of satisfactory production equipment. For instance, the presidents of WADGs mentioned that the equipment they used for handicrafts was often inadequate and that there was not enough equipment for all their members, meaning their total production capacity was limited.

4.2 Degree of autonomy

4.2.1 Differing viewpoints

The participants in the workshop all gave their definition of an autonomous WADG. For the staff of public administration, a key criterion is to not to feel blocked when faced with a difficulty. What is more, in their opinion, an autonomous group is one that, once it has received support, takes initiatives on its own: it only contacts the administration in the case of an emergency or if it needs support to succeed in a project it has designed itself. For the presidents of the WADGs, being autonomous means being able to start new activities, overcome constraints, dispose of money for investments (for packaging, etc.) and premises where they can receive partners both for production and to use as a retail outlet for WADG products. For the members of the WADGs, being autonomous means the group has different activities, offers their members opportunities, encourages collective action, and includes young unemployed graduates.

The workshop participants ranked all the WADGs with which they were familiar according to their degree of autonomy (Tab. 6). The three groups of participants ranked the WADGs differently. The presidents of WADGs did not consider any of the groups to be autonomous because they linked autonomy with the performance of the WADG, which, in their opinion, was affected by a series of constraints, including lack of their own funds and of suitable premises. The presidents considered that the income earned from the WADGs' activities was not sufficient to overcome these constraints. They also mentioned frequent conflicts, lack of transparency, the lack of skills of the management committees, and members' lack of motivation for collective action. The WADG members had a different opinion: they did not rank any group as having limited autonomy. They explained that despite the constraints facing the groups, the groups did take initiatives; these ranged from creating collective infrastructure to processing and marketing a number of local products, all of which helped improve the living conditions of women and their families.

Despite these differences, all the workshop participants assessed the comparative situation of any of the two WADGs

ranked in the pairwise comparison similarly. Among the groups generally considered as having a moderate or high degree of autonomy, Zidi Kesra WADG had contacted a mutual company to be able to sell their products in supermarkets in Tunisia. This WADG also contacted a public agency for support to organising international sales and finally took part in a trade fair in Italy. Dar Mhannya and Borj Massoudi took the initiative to submit tenders for olive pruning.

In fact, several WADGs that were widely considered to be autonomous (Zidi Kesra, Dar Mhannya, Nour) had received continuous support since their inception. They had benefitted from a "virtuous circle", *i.e.* because they succeeded, they were selected to receive further support, which in turn, supported their good performance. Most of the WADGs rated as having limited autonomy were created on the initiative of development actors. One exception was El Hayet WADG: this group was created on the initiative of its members, but was later affected by several internal conflicts, in particular linked to some members' refusal to sell through the group.

4.2.2 Factors that influence the degree of autonomy

According to public administration staff, the main factors influencing group autonomy were the members' degree of motivation, the skills of members of the management committee, and the lack of an appropriate legal framework. These staff pointed out that "*the most important criterion is members' commitment, material problems come second.*" The director of the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture in Siliana mentioned "*if you provide inputs for individual production, for example, an animal like a sheep, right from the start, the WADG can't move forward. It only weakens collective action. It's better to give equipment that requires collective action, for example, an incubator.*"

The presidents cited the problem of inspiring collective action and internal conflict as two other main obstacles to the autonomy of the groups. For instance, some WADG members go to trade fairs on behalf of the group but concentrate on selling their own products – for which they have received group support – without paying the share due to the WADG.

The members of the WADGs listed the following factors as facilitating the autonomy of WADGs. First, they underlined the presence of young graduates in the management committee. In their view, these young graduates help innovate, for example, through digital marketing. Dar Mhannya WADG had taken on young people who subsequently succeeded in obtaining financial support and training to improve packaging. Second, the WADG members mentioned that WADGs could build

women's skills up front, to be able to take advantage of any funding opportunities that may arise later. Third, WADG members mentioned the members' willingness to improve the WADG in the long term.

5 Discussion

5.1 Autonomy: a different way of considering support for WADGs

The definitions of WADG autonomy provided by the public administration staff, by the presidents and members of the WADGs can be considered to be complementary, especially since in the pairwise comparisons, the participants gave the same relative assessment of two WADGs. Each definition relates to a specific strand of literature on rural development organisations. The definition given by the administration staff relates to the common understanding in social sciences of an actor's 'agency', *i.e.* the capacity for self-determination and the capacity to getting others involved to achieve one's own project (Giddens, 1984; Long, 2003). This definition of autonomy, *i.e.* collective agency, has already been used to analyse farmers' organisations (*e.g.*, Faysse and Thomas, 2016), and is close to the one proposed by the research team involved in the present study, an indicator of which is whether WADGs actually started any new activities on their own initiative. It turned out that none of the WADGs that were considered by public administration staff as having limited or medium autonomy had taken the initiative to start a new activity on their own, whereas the WADGs the public administration staff considered as being autonomous had taken the initiative to start one or two activities on their own (Tab. 2). Thus, the definition used by the research team and the one used by the public administration staff resulted in similar ranking of the WADGs.

The definition provided by WADG presidents amounted to the ability and means of WADGs to act. Some authors (*e.g.*, Berahmani *et al.*, 2016; Donovan *et al.*, 2017) have paid attention to such inner capacities of farmers' organisations. Finally, the definition proposed by members was related to the performance of collective action, as defined by Shah (1996), that is, members' satisfaction that the organisation plays a meaningful role in improving their everyday lives.

The factors identified by the three groups of participants as influencing the autonomy of WADGs concerned the management and technical skills of group members and their willingness to work together. These factors, which focus on human resources, differ from the material resources needed to overcome most of the constraints that participants considered to hinder the development of WADGs (Tab. 5). The above citation from the director of the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture underlines his belief that providing material support right from the beginning may actually weaken collective action.

Among the – still limited – studies on women's development organisations in rural areas of North Africa, some do list the constraints faced by these organisations and, accordingly, identify a series of possible actions to address these constraints (Thieux, 2010; Nations Unies, 2014; Gueddana, 2021; Montanari *et al.*, 2023). Such approaches to constraints can solve specific problems but may fail to

account for and address how to strengthen the autonomy of WADGs.

5.2 Limited consideration of WADG autonomy by actors of the supporting "ecosystem"

A wide range of actors have supported the creation and functioning of WADGs in Siliana Governorate. However, their support approach often focused on how to solve short-term problems, not always in "a long-term perspective" that would include strengthening the autonomy of WADGs. Actors of the support ecosystem sometimes take the initiative to increase the autonomy of WADGs, but only do so as individuals. For instance, the representative of the Rural Women's Office in Siliana Governorate tried to support the participation of WADG members in trade fairs because she had observed that, at these fairs, the members exchanged experiences and subsequently built their own networks.

There is growing awareness in Tunisia of the need to promote the autonomy of farmers' cooperatives in general (El Harizi *et al.*, 2019). However, enhancing the collective autonomy of WADGs is not mentioned as an explicit goal in public policies or among the strategies of support agencies. For example, the goal of supporting women's autonomy is officially stated in public policy documents (*e.g.*, by the Tunisian *Ministère de la Femme, de la Famille et de l'Enfance*, 2017) but the focus is on women as individuals, not as collectives. This lack of a long-term view of increasing the autonomy of women's associations is compounded by the fragmentation of actors who support these associations in Tunisia, *e.g.*, administrations, international actors, NGOs involved in rural development (Pontiggia *et al.*, 2022). The same phenomenon has been reported in Morocco (Benkhallouk, 2020) and in Algeria (Thieux, 2010). The "ecosystem" fashioned by all actors involved in supporting women's associations in rural areas of Tunisia needs to be more structured: better coordination between these actors will improve multi-level and inter-institutional governance and will support activities that aim to enhance the autonomy of WADGs.

6 Conclusion

The WADGs in Siliana Governorate were only created a few years ago. Nevertheless, the majority have already proven their ability to continue to function despite the difficulties they have had to face, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic when marketing was very difficult. Apart from El Amal WADG, all the groups have found a compromise between the context in which they evolve, the objectives of their members, and what the group can offer them. Some groups were also able to define their own development pathway and proactively search for new opportunities. In that sense, considerable progress has been made along the long road to the autonomy of WADGs in Siliana Governorate, although much still remains before sustained forms of autonomy of these organisations is achieved.

Approaches that aim to strengthen existing women's organisations often start by listing the constraints faced by these organisations and actions designed to overcome them. Such an approach can provide much needed practical solutions

to these problems and may help provide a context that favours their autonomy. However, it also runs the risk of only considering them as “objects” of development “machinery” (Li, 2007). The approach we describe here is a complementary way to strengthen WADGs that puts their autonomy at the centre of the analysis and that undertakes such analysis jointly with the members of these organisations. Such an approach will help ensure these organisations are full partners in supporting their own development and, by so doing, enhance their positive influence on women throughout rural areas of North Africa. However, focusing on improving capacities at community level should not deflect from the need to improve the existing legal framework that currently also limits the functioning of WADGs.

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