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Tapping in to Local Knowledge: Harnessing Communities for Tunisia's Sustainable Energy Sector Development

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Policy Problem Statement

Across Tunisia's resource-producing regions, social mobilization has repeatedly emerged as a mechanism through which communities express demands for development, environmental protection, and participation in decisionmaking. These mobilizations are not isolated events but reflect deeper governance challenges in the management of natural resources and environmental impacts, particularly in the oil and gas sector and the phosphate mining industry.

In several regions, local communities perceive that decisions affecting their livelihood such as extractive activities, environmental management, and development priorities, are taken through centralized processes with limited opportunities for meaningful local participation. When institutional dialogue channels are weak or ineffective, social movements often become the primary means through which citizens articulate grievances and demand accountability.

The El Kamour movement in southern Tunisia demonstrated how exclusion from decisionmaking around oil production and regional development can escalate into large-scale mobilization when dialogue between communities and authorities breaks down. Environmental mobilization in Gabès, where phosphate processing activities have generated long-standing environmental and public health concerns, reflects similar dynamics of frustration linked to perceived environmental injustice and limited transparency.

In Tunisia's natural resources governance, women have played a critical role in driving mobilizations around extractive activities and decisionmaking processes. Women were often at the forefront of community movements, raising environmental and social concerns and contributing to the creation of guides and participatory tools for articulating local grievances. Their role highlights the need to consider not only an energy transition, but also a *social transition*.

Recent community engagement initiatives including programs implemented by the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI) to strengthen civil society capacity and facilitate dialogue between communities and authorities in southern Tunisia, highlight the importance of building institutionalized channels for participation and trust-building in resource governance.

These experiences reveal a broader governance gap: Communities directly affected by extractive activities often lack institutionalized channels to influence decisions related to resource management and environmental protection. If these participation gaps remain unresolved, similar tensions may emerge as Tunisia expands renewable energy projects and climate transition policies, potentially reproducing governance challenges already observed in the extractive sector.

Key Policy Questions and Policy Relevance

Tunisia's experience raises several policy questions that are relevant not only for national decisionmakers but also for international actors supporting climate and energy transition policies in the region.

- 1. How can Tunisia institutionalize meaningful participation for communities affected by extractive activities in decisionmaking processes related to natural resource governance and regional development?**

Current consultation mechanisms often remain ad hoc or reactive, emerging only after tensions escalate. Establishing structured and continuous dialogue platforms between communities, government institutions, and civil society could help prevent conflicts and strengthen policy legitimacy. These platforms should explicitly ensure women's representation, especially given their historic exclusion from oil-related spaces yet proven leadership in community mobilization.

- 2. What governance mechanisms can ensure that environmental and social concerns in extractive regions are addressed transparently and collaboratively?**

Environmental grievances linked to mining and oil and gas activities highlight

the need for improved transparency, access to environmental information, and inclusive monitoring mechanisms involving local communities. This includes clarity on oil companies' exit plans and updated decommissioning standards so that communities understand timelines, risks and economic implications.

3. How can community engagement practices developed in the extractive sector inform Tunisia's climate and energy transition policies?

As Tunisia expands renewable energy projects and climate adaptation initiatives, lessons from resource-producing regions suggest that early engagement with affected communities is essential to prevent future governance tensions. Lessons from extractive regions, including the need for gender-inclusive approaches and attention to social justice concerns, should be integrated into energy transition planning.

4. What role can civil society organizations play in facilitating dialogue and mediating between communities and government institutions?

Strengthening the capacity of civil society actors to represent community concerns and support evidence-based dialogue can help bridge governance gaps and contribute to more inclusive policy processes. CSOs and local governments can collaborate to assess technical documents such as EIAs or contract exit clauses, compensating for gaps in state capacity; especially utilizing community-based evidence and knowledge.

Policy Recommendations

National Government

Strengthen institutionalized dialogue between communities and decisionmakers.

Governments should establish permanent dialogue mechanisms that allow communities in resource-producing and environmentally affected regions to participate in decisions related to natural resource governance, environmental management, and development planning. These mechanisms should operate continuously rather than only during moments of crisis and should ensure the participation of women and other groups historically excluded from extractive decisionmaking. Institutionalized dialogue platforms that bring together communities, civil society organizations, local authorities, and national institutions can help prevent tensions and foster trust between stakeholders.

Integrate community engagement into resource and climate governance frameworks. Participation should be embedded within regulatory and policy frameworks

governing the extractive and energy sectors, including oil, gas, mining, and renewable energy development. This includes incorporating structured community consultations into project planning, environmental impact assessments, and regional development strategies. Ensuring that communities are consulted early in decisionmaking processes can improve the legitimacy and sustainability of both extractive activities and energy transition initiatives.

Improve transparency and access to environmental and resource information.

Transparent access to environmental data, impact assessments, and information on resource governance is essential for meaningful participation. Governments should strengthen mechanisms that enable communities, researchers, and civil society organizations to access and use environmental and economic information related to extractive activities and energy projects. Improving transparency can enhance accountability and enable communities to engage constructively in policy discussions.

Align climate and energy transition policies with local development priorities. As Tunisia expands renewable energy projects and climate adaptation initiatives, policymakers should ensure that these strategies address local development concerns alongside climate objectives. Integrating regional economic priorities, such as employment opportunities, environmental protection, and infrastructure development, into climate policies can help build public support for the energy transition and avoid reproducing governance tensions already observed in extractive regions. This also means ensuring that the energy transition is also a social transition, addressing inequalities, including gender disparities, within resource regions.

Municipalities and Local Authorities

Strengthen the role of local authorities in participatory governance. Municipalities and regional authorities should be supported to facilitate community engagement in local development and environmental planning processes. Local governments are often the closest institutions to affected communities and can play a key role in convening dialogue between citizens, civil society organizations, and national authorities.

Civil Society Organizations

Support the role of civil society in community engagement and mediation. Civil society organizations can play an important role in facilitating dialogue between communities and public institutions. Strengthening the capacity of these actors through training, funding, and access to information can help communities articulate their priorities and engage more effectively with policymakers. Experience in southern Tunisia demonstrates that organized

civil society networks can contribute to reducing tensions by supporting structured communication and evidence-based advocacy.

Donors and International Climate Funds

Adapt international climate finance to local governance realities. International donors and climate finance institutions should ensure that funding mechanisms support community engagement, participatory governance processes, and locally driven initiatives. Programs that strengthen local institutional capacity and support inclusive governance approaches can contribute to more sustainable and socially legitimate climate and energy transition policies.