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From institutions and policies to intermediaries: actor roles in shaping agroecological futures in tunisia

HASSEN OUERGHEMMI¹, AYMEN FRIJA², ZAHRA SHIRI³, HICHEM REJEB⁴

¹*International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), Social, Economic and Policy Research Team, Tunisia*

²*International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), Social, Economic and Policy Research Team,*

³*International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), Social, Economic, and Policy Research Team (SEPR), Tunisia*

⁴*ISA Chott Meriem, Sousse University, Tunisia*

Abstract

Tunisia's agricultural systems face mounting imperatives to transition toward agroecological sustainability, yet institutional fragmentation and policy inertia perpetuate productivism paradigms, exacerbating risks of rural abandonment, ecological degradation, and socio-political inequity. This study investigates the institutional and policy dynamics shaping these challenges, focusing on the northwestern Tunisia as a microcosm of Tunisia's agrarian landscape. Employing a transdisciplinary mixed-methods approach, the research integrates multi-scale institutional mapping to decode interactions between centralised governance bodies, farmer organisations, and local actors; social network analysis to quantify the mediation roles of agricultural associations using metrics such as degree centrality, eigenvector centrality, and proximity centrality; and critical review of national policy documents associated to KIIs to identify systemic biases. Findings reveal entrenched institutional barriers: fragmented governance structures prioritise short-term productivity and food security, marginalising agroecological principles, while power asymmetries between state institutions and local stakeholders stifle participatory decision-making. Farmer organisations, though pivotal as innovation intermediaries, exhibit uneven capacities due to inefficient resource allocation and weak institutional support, as evidenced by disparities in their network influence and mediation functions. Policy analysis underscores a persistent disconnect between agroecological advocacy and operational frameworks, with quantitative targets overshadowing ecological and equity considerations, thereby reinforcing productivism lock-ins. The study identifies sociotechnical inertia, rooted in historical dependencies on intensive practices, as a critical impediment to systemic change. To address these challenges, the research proposes an adaptive governance model emphasising three pillars: (1) institutional recalibration to decentralise authority and integrate agroecological metrics into policy design; (2) strengthened multi-actor networks through capacity-building for farmer organisations and inclusive dialogue platforms; and (3) iterative policy learning to align national strategies with territorial realities. By advocating for a paradigm shift from rigid, top-down planning to flexible, human-centered governance, this work highlights the necessity of reconciling productivity with ecological and socio-political resilience. The insights not only provide a roadmap for Tunisia but also contribute a replicable framework

for institutional and policy analysis in agrarian contexts globally, underscoring the centrality of coherent governance, equitable power distribution, and adaptive institutions in enabling sustainable agroecological transitions.

Keywords: Agroecology, Governance Dynamics, Network Analysis, policy Inertia