

Public-Private Dialogue

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Tunisia / Multisector

THE TUNISIAN NATIONAL BUSINESS AGENDA

By

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Public-Private Dialogue 2017 Workshop, Tunis, May 9-11, 2017

Summary

A **National Business Agenda (NBA)** is an innovative PPD process and a product that has been used across the world by the Center for International Private Enterprise to help local private sector groups improve business environments. Grassroots feedback from everyday businesspeople is obtained to identify reform priorities, which in turn are transformed into an NBA document that provides a coherent economic reform roadmap. Tunisia's NBA is overseen by a public-private Steering Committee of representatives from the Arab Institute for Business Leaders, the Office of the Presidency, and the country's two most prominent private sector organizations, the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts, and the Tunisian Union for Agriculture and Fishing. Together, these actors have: established a PPD mechanism that has fostered **ongoing, broad-based discussions about economic reform**; launched a **hotline for businesspeople across Tunisia to report bureaucratic barriers** in real time and get their cases resolved, which is seeing more calls every day; delivered **ongoing surveys** that tell decision makers how the private sector rates government reform efforts, and what issues matter most to businesspeople; and, generated substantive **policy papers and draft laws** that have been submitted to government for consideration. There are also several indications that the NBA is **becoming part of the national fabric** in an institutional sense.

1- Background and Context

A National Business Agenda (NBA) is both a process and a product that has been used across the world to help local private sector groups improve business environments. The process generally begins when a private sector organization holds grassroots consultations with everyday businesspeople to identify shared concerns and reform priorities. All this information is then synthesized into a product: a National Business Agenda document that provides a cohesive, coherent roadmap for reform. A coalition representing this unified business voice then advocates for systematic implementation of key reforms, working with decision makers and other allies. The NBA model originated with the United States Chamber of Commerce, and has been since been brought to other countries by an international non-governmental organization called the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). All NBAs are characterized by inclusiveness, issue-based advocacy and private-private, as well as public-private dialogue, but the model is also highly adaptable, and each country has its own brand and approach. In Tunisia, the NBA process was introduced by the Arab



NBA activities in Bangladesh, Serbia and Afghanistan.

Institute for Business Leaders (*Institut arabe des chefs des entreprises* - IACE), which is a CIPE partner. IACE had seen the NBA be highly effective in other countries and felt that it could be a key mechanism for addressing Tunisia's economic problems.

2- Youth and Inclusion dimension

Tunisia's economy must start to function for the average citizen – and especially young Tunisians – for Tunisia to realize its potential and see a bright future. Tunisia's NBA initiative is unique in that aims to address the country's economic problems in a way that is inclusive, systematic and priority-driven. "Bottom-up" consultations are central to this PPD initiative, and surveys, roundtables and other NBA activities solicit opinions and feedbacks from businessmen and women of all ages, from businesses of all sectors and sizes, all across the country. The public sector, private sector and civil society all have an active role to play in NBA-supported economic dialogue, instilling ownership of the process among the various actors. At the same time, the NBA has also embedded a new framework for proactive collaboration among major economic decision makers, leaders and influencers in Tunisia, some of whom had not been in regular contact before.

3- Partnership, Structure and Processes

The NBA process started based with a Memorandum of Understanding that IACE signed with the Tunisian Office of the Presidency, and the country's two most prominent private sector organizations, the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts (*Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat* - UTICA) and the Tunisian Union for Agriculture and Fishing (*Union tunisienne de l'agriculture et de la pêche* - UTAP). These signatories then formed a Steering Committee made up of IACE, UTICA, UTAP and the Office of the Presidency representatives to coordinate NBA efforts and discuss substantive issues.

Tunisia's NBA – like Tunisia – is unique, and adapted to the country's context and urgent challenges. It was specifically designed to use the NBA mechanisms to implement "quick wins" and reduce citizens' frustration with what they see as government inaction on the economy. At the same time, it preserves the NBA's crucial democratic and civic spirit through bottom-up consultation, ongoing dialogue, and fact-based advocacy, to drive systemic reform over time. Specifically, the project involves three complementary pillars:

- **Pillar 1: Addressing Urgent Needs**

IACE has developed SOS IJRAAT, a **hotline and mobile application** for businesspeople across Tunisia to report inefficiencies and barriers they encounter in real time. IACE compiles monthly reports that the Steering Committee members review and send onward for specific action. As the hotline resolves specific cases for businesses, it also collects overall data so that the Steering Committee can detect systemic problems that need addressing at higher levels.

- **Pillar 2: Advancing Reforms Underway**

IACE and its allies use surveys to solicit input from members and other stakeholders, and produce indexes that give decision makers private sector input on **laws and policies already under consideration**.

- **Pillar 3: Driving Longer-Term Reform Efforts**

This pillar represents what might be called a "**classic NBA**." Using private sector input on priorities and concerns for the future, IACE, UTICA, UTAP and the Office of the Presidency representatives in the Steering Committee have formed **working groups** on specific themes,

created **policy papers** with specific reform recommendations, and developed **draft laws to advocate to policy makers**.

4- Results so far

After a year and half, Tunisia's NBA has seen progress and impact on several levels, from granular outputs to more systemic successes that show the NBA is becoming embedded as a public-private mechanism for economic reform in Tunisia.



A still-frame from an SOS IJRAAT YouTube video

Pillar 1: Addressing urgent needs - The SOS IJRAAT hotline and case management system is up and running. Each call is logged and coded, and then analyzed by Steering Committee, which then passes each case file to the appropriate government agency for attention. These are now dozens of calls a day, and every month, additional businesses are getting their problems resolved, so they can start producing and help drive Tunisia's economy. As the calls have come in, IACE has also aggregated data on the most common problems businesspeople experience, and flagged systemic issues that will need higher-level legal, regulatory or policy action.

Pillar 2: Advancing Reforms Underway - IACE has conducted a series of surveys for the NBA effort one that asked businesspeople to evaluate the quality of business administration services (QSA) provided by various government ministries, and the government's overall progress vis-à-vis the areas for reform laid out in Tunisia's Carthage Accord. These will be delivered yearly, and IACE will publish indexes to show change in private sector opinion over time. The idea is that these indexes will serve as accountability mechanisms, while also providing crucial barometers for policymakers on private sector needs and priorities.



Recent NBA consultation roundtable on bond markets

Pillar 3: Driving Longer-term Reform Efforts – The NBA framework is also generating new, concrete reform recommendations and sharing them with decision makers for consideration. A working group composed of representatives from the Ministries of Finance, Investment, and Justice (government), UTICA, UTAP, and IACE (private sector), and Uprod'it (Tunisia's largest association of freelancers) developed a policy paper on self-employment, and then a draft law that was submitted to the Tunisian parliament. Draft articles to reform the Right of Appeal process for businesses in Tunisia were also submitted to the government's administrative tribunal. Further reform recommendations are under development and will continue to emerge. The NBA Steering Committee

is drafting a National Business Agenda document that proposes solutions to issues not yet on the government radar, such as bond and equity markets. Ongoing roundtables with broad-based groups of private sector constituents are providing feedback to ensure all recommendations are on point.

Beyond these specific outputs, the NBA shows signs of progressively becoming embedded as a major PPD mechanism in Tunisia. For example, recent implementation regulations for Tunisia's long-awaited investment code established an investment body to propose investment-related policies and reforms to Tunisia's High Council on Investment, and mentioned the NBA as the reference for all recommendations.

5- Expected Results

The Tunisia NBA initiative provides a bottom-up approach to addressing Tunisia's economic problems. Instead of the government consulting experts and telling citizens what needs to happen, the NBA helps the government is basing its decisions on what it is hearing from citizens, and particularly from everyday businesspeople and entrepreneurs, who experience economic barriers directly. At the same time, the NBA is helping increase the civic participation of the private sector across Tunisia, and showing that it can have an impact, which a central goal of this initiative. Eventually, the concept of PPD will become an integral component to economic development in Tunisia, as the public sector, private sector and civil society continue to work together to create a better economic future for the country.

6- Challenges

The largest challenge to any NBA is getting it started – actors on all sides need to buy in, and this takes time and dialogue. Once people are on board, organization also takes work – deciding who will do what, how will leadership be defined at each step, and what structures will be created. In countries such as Tunisia, with a history of top-down authority and centralization, there is also a mentality shift required in favor of citizen-centric, bottom-up input, even if some expertise certainly must come from the top. Lastly, in Tunisia specifically, there is the context itself. Tunisia is dealing with political and economic challenges on multiple fronts, which makes collaboration and consensus that much harder. In the face of so many urgent needs, prioritization can be incredibly difficult. The NBA, however, is ideal for this situation, since it both convenes different actors in a common framework, *and* provides them with an approach that helps them find consensus on the issues, choose what they wish to work on together, and advocate transparently and democratically for those priorities. While it does this, it also links people across sectors, creating new working relationships and trust among disparate actors. The NBA has made significant strides in a relatively short period in Tunisia, and has the power to create a brighter economic future for Tunisia, which in turn will go a long way to helping the country flourish as a full-fledged democracy.

Mr. Majdi Hassen, Executive Director, IACE - Majdi Hassen is the executive director of the *Institut arabe des chefs d'entreprises* (IACE), an independent, non-profit think tank based in Tunis, Tunisia. Under his leadership, IACE has greatly expanded its impact and influence. Mr. Hassen has been particularly instrumental in organizing IACE's Enterprise Days, Tunisia's biggest economic forum, which gathers over 1000 national and international policymakers, business leaders, and experts to exchange on critical private sector issues. Since Tunisia's revolution, he has overseen IACE's growth into a "think-and-do" tank that plays a vital role in convening diverse political and civic actors to discuss urgent economic problems. He has also developed a series of IACE programs designed to bring leadership skills and civic awareness to young entrepreneurs, policymakers and stakeholders in Tunisia. Mr. Hassen has significant experience working with international organizations such as CIPE, the World Economic Forum, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the State Department Middle East Program Initiative, the World Bank and others. Mr. Hassen is also an assistant professor at Tunisia's School of Economic and Management Science. He holds a Doctorate in Finance, and is a certified trainer with the United Nations Development Program in entrepreneurship, and with the International Finance Corporation in corporate governance.

Ms. Pamela Beecroft, Senior Program Officer, CIPE - Pamela Beecroft is Senior Program Officer for North Africa at the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), a democracy and governance organization that seeks to foster the development of independent business associations, think tanks and chambers of commerce abroad, and support their participation in policy debate and economic reform advocacy. Working in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, Ms. Beecroft's portfolio spans a range of projects by local partners, including a capacity building program for associations in Morocco, a CIPE, Ms. Beecroft worked at the World Bank for five years, supporting implementation of ex-combatant demobilization and reintegration projects in Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ms. Beecroft has spent significant time living, working, and/or traveling in both the Levant and the Maghreb throughout her life. She holds a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School at Tufts University. She speaks fluent French and intermediate Arabic, as well as being functional in several other languages.