

# **Report on Tunis Webinar – DECODE Case Study (Tunisia)**

## ***Waste Pickers in Tunisia: Navigating Social Inequality and Ecological Responsibility***



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## 1. General Information about the Webinar



This Arabic-speaking webinar presents a community-based research project in Tunisia exploring the lived experiences, knowledge, and environmental contributions of the Barbecha (informal waste pickers), whose work supports urban sustainability yet often remains unrecognized. The session will also introduce an interactive StoryMap developed through the project, bringing together stories, images, and community perspectives.

### DECODE WEBINAR SERIES



MON. 23 MAR. 2026



7AM PST/ 3PM CST



UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education



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[decodeknowledge.org](https://decodeknowledge.org)

- **Date and time:** 23rd March 2026, 3:00 PM (CET, UTC+1)
- **Region:** Tunis, Tunisia
- **Webinar Title:** *Waste Pickers in Tunisia: Navigating Social Inequality and Ecological Responsibility*
- **Format :** Hybrid (Zoom platform & on site at Institut Pasteur de Tunis)
- **DECODE Project Regional Team:**  
Meriam Belghith, Dorra Wider, Hanen Chebbi, Oumaima Ouni, Sonia Maatoug, Med Fourat Thamine, Chayma Abdellaoui, Nouha Jendoubi
- **Webinar Leaders:**  
Meriam Belghith & Dorra Wider
- **Community Participants / Speakers:**  
Miled Rjeb, Saida Dridi, Mourad Belghithi, Mouhamed Sahbeni, Houssine Ben Jaballah, Fatma Khaldi, Fatima Marouen

## □ **Partner Institutions / Networks:**

- Olivia Andrade Almeida & Budd Hall : Decode Project, UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, University of Victoria, PRIA.
- Oussama M'hir : Association Ectourism and Environment+, Nabeul
- Meriam Jnayah (ANGED)(she was invited but she didn't come)

## ● **Webinar Platform:**

Zoom (coordination via decodeknowledge@uvic.ca)

## ● **Number of participants:**

32

## **2. Webinar Overview**

The objective of the webinar was to present the DECODE case study “*Waste Pickers in Tunisia: Navigating Social Inequality and Ecological Responsibility*” and to highlight the lived experiences, knowledge systems, and environmental contributions of informal waste pickers (barbecha) in Tunisia. The session aimed to reposition these actors not as marginal workers, but as essential contributors to the circular economy and urban environmental sustainability.

A central component of the webinar was the presentation of the interactive StoryMap, which documents the daily practices, trajectories, and ecological knowledge of waste pickers through a participatory research approach. This tool serves both as a platform for visibility and as a medium for co-constructing knowledge with community members.

The webinar also functioned as a space for dialogue between researchers and community partners, fostering reflection on issues of social inequality, recognition, and environmental governance. Particular emphasis was placed on how experiential, practice-based knowledge challenges dominant institutional models and contributes to more inclusive policy thinking.

The webinar agenda was structured as follows:

### □ **Welcome and introduction to the webinar (5 mins)**

Moderator: Meriem Belghith (Arabic)

### □ **Highlights of emerging key messages (common presentation) (15 mins)**

Speaker: Budd Hall (with Arabic translation)

### □ **Case study presentations and StoryMap launch (20 mins)**

Presentation of each case study, including introduction and launch of StoryMaps. Multilingual delivery where possible.

Speaker: Dorra Wider

□ **Regional expert panel discussion (45 mins)**

Moderated discussion on case studies and key themes introduced at the beginning of the webinar. Includes audience questions from the chat.

Moderator: Meriem Belghith

Panelists:

- Miled Rjeb
- aste pickers: Saida Dridi, Mourad Belghithi, Mouhamed Sahbeni, Houssine Ben Jaballah, Fatma Khaldi, Fatima Marouen
- Association ETE+
- Meriem Jnayah (ANGED – invited, did not attend)
- Hanen Chebbi : Social Scientist

□ **Closing of the webinar (5 mins)**

MC/Moderator: Meriem Belghith

### **3. Development of the Session**

#### **3.1 Welcoming and introduction of the Webinar**



#### **3.2 Presentation of the DECODE Project**

The session opened with a presentation of the DECODE project's objectives, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge and the recognition of community-based expertise. Within this framework, the Tunisian case study was introduced, focusing on the informal waste sector and highlighting the socio-economic and environmental roles of waste pickers.

The project itself is grounded in the principles of co-construction, decolonization, and transformation in community-based knowledge production. It is led by the UNESCO Chair for Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, and Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Its broader aim is to strengthen community-driven approaches to knowledge creation and to amplify Indigenous and grassroots research practices worldwide.

The presentation was delivered by Budd Hall in English, accompanied by Arabic slides to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for the audience. This bilingual format helped bridge language differences and supported a clearer understanding of the content.

DECODE Webinar – Waste Pickers in Tunisia: Navigating Social Inequality and Ecological Responsibility 23 mars 2026 06:42 AM Télécharger (9 fichiers)

ما هو الهدف من هذا المشروع؟  
هناك ثلاثة أهداف أساسية لمشروع DECODE

1. تنظيم الممارسات الحالية للبحوث التشاركية التي تقودها المجتمعات المحلية لاستخلاص الدروس حول القيم والمبادئ والأخلاقيات والأساليب التي تدعم التأثيرات متعددة الأبعاد على التحديات التنموية الحالية.
2. تسهيل التعلم من الأقران حول الممارسات الجيدة بين المجتمع المدني والعلماء المشاركين والباحثين المجتمعيين، وتدريب الجيل القادم من الباحثين لتعميق السياسات والممارسات المؤثرة في المستقبل.
3. إنشاء منصة رقمية مفتوحة للجميع تعمل على تعزيز الديمقراطية المعرفية، حيث يمكن إتاحة DECODE وغيرها من التجارب في مجال البحوث التي يقودها المجتمع و/أو السكان الأصليين في جميع أنحاء العالم. **In fact, we can work these. These 2 can work together.**

Transcription Messages de discussion

sonia maatoug 24:56  
Bonjour à tous; merci pour votre présence nous commençons dans quelques minutes, merci pour votre patience

Samia Rourou 25:37  
bonsoir et aïd Moubarak à tous

The session further outlined the project's key objectives and global scope. These include systematizing community-led research practices to better understand their ethics, values, and developmental impact; promoting peer learning and knowledge exchange between civil society actors, academic researchers, and community-based practitioners; supporting the training of emerging researchers in participatory methodologies; and developing an open-access "knowledge democracy platform" to share DECODE and other Indigenous-led research experiences globally. These objectives are illustrated through case studies conducted between 2024 and 2025 across the Americas (Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, Western Canada), Africa (Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Uganda), and Asia (India and Malaysia).

At the end of the presentation, Dorra provided a concise summary of Budd Hall's main points in Arabic, ensuring that all participants fully understood the key

messages and reinforcing accessibility and shared understanding across the audience.

### 3.3 StoryMap Presentation

The presentation of the StoryMap focused on valorizing waste pickers (“barbechas”) as both essential environmental actors and holders of valuable experiential knowledge developed through everyday practice. Through participants’ life stories and daily experiences, the presentation highlighted how waste picking, although often entered through economic hardship and social exclusion, became a means of survival, dignity, and social participation.



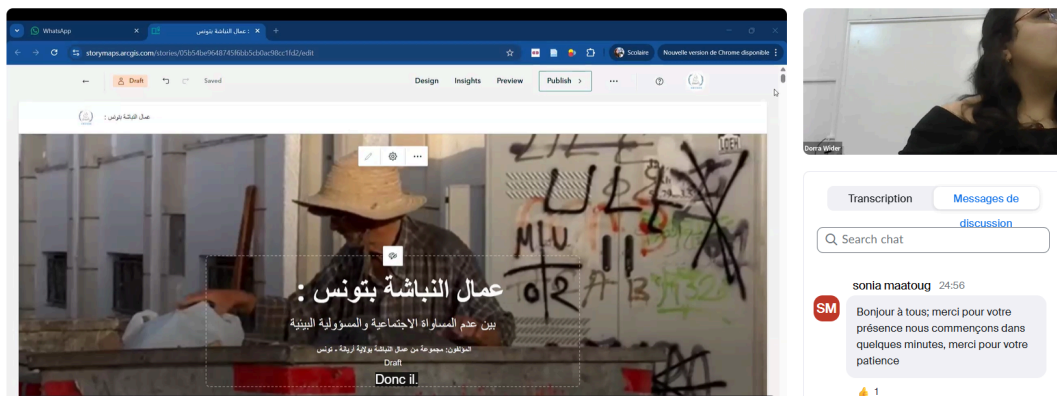
The StoryMap emphasized the important environmental contribution of waste pickers through their activities of collecting, sorting, and recycling materials, thereby supporting urban cleanliness, reducing waste accumulation, and contributing to informal circular economies. Particular attention was given to the practical knowledge developed through this work, including expertise in recyclable materials, knowledge of urban routes and waste flows, and strategies for managing physical and social risks in the field.

The presentation also stressed that this knowledge is rarely recognized within formal institutional or academic frameworks, despite its complexity and relevance. In this regard, the StoryMap contributed to promoting the recognition of waste pickers as

legitimate producers of environmental and urban knowledge, in line with principles of cognitive justice.

In addition, the presentation described the participatory methodology adopted throughout the project. The research was conducted collaboratively with waste pickers through field accompaniment, participatory visual methods (Photovoice), collective discussions, and shared interpretation of findings. This approach enabled participants to actively shape the representation of their experiences and expertise.

 **DECODE Webinar – Waste Pickers in Tunisia: Navigating Social Inequality and Ecological Responsibility** ↓ Télécharger (9 fichiers)  
23 mars 2026 06:42 AM



Overall, the StoryMap presentation highlighted the need for greater recognition of waste pickers' contributions, knowledge, and lived expertise within discussions on waste management, environmental sustainability, and urban policy.

[Link to the StoryMap :

<https://www.unescochair-cbrsr.org/decode/casestudy/tunis.-tunisia/9> ]

### 3.3 Roundtable Discussion: Key Themes

The roundtable brought together civil society actors, informal waste pickers, and social scientists in an attempt to jointly reflect on both the lived realities of recycling work and possible pathways for improving working conditions in collaboration with public institutions, particularly the Agence Nationale de Gestion des Déchets (ANGED), which represents the Ministry of Environment in Tunisia and is mandated to develop and strengthen waste infrastructure, support municipalities and industries, launch and structure collection, recycling and valorisation systems, and promote private sector participation and job creation within the waste sector.



The discussion was therefore oriented toward exploring how such institutional missions could more meaningfully integrate informal waste pickers, who currently perform essential but largely unrecognized environmental labor.

Civil society actors and researchers emphasized that waste pickers are not only workers but also producers of situated knowledge about urban waste systems, while participants themselves reflected on their daily practices as forms of expertise and analysis, effectively positioning themselves as both workers and researchers of their own conditions. Together, the group discussed practical and structural proposals for improving working conditions, including formal recognition, safer and more organized collection systems, access to social protection, and stronger inclusion of informal workers within municipal and national waste governance frameworks.

However, a key limitation shaped the discussion : despite being formally invited, representatives of ANGED did not attend the roundtable. Their absence highlighted the governance gap under discussion, reinforcing participants' concerns about weak institutional engagement and the lack of direct dialogue between national waste authorities and the workers who sustain recycling systems on the ground.

Several key themes emerged:

### **3.3.1. Civil Society as a Bridge Between Workers and Institutions**

A central theme emerging from the discussion is the role of civil society actors in bridging the gap between informal waste collectors and formal institutions. Participants consistently describe a situation of weak or absent direct communication

with public authorities, and instead emphasize the importance of individuals, associations, and grassroots initiatives that are present in their daily environments.

Civil society engagement is described as enabling several interconnected functions:

- building trust with informal recyclers and waste pickers,
- giving visibility to labor that is often socially and institutionally invisible,
- documenting everyday working conditions and urban realities,
- creating spaces for dialogue and collective expression,
- supporting workers in understanding the structure and value of their own activities,
- and facilitating connections between collectors, buyers, recyclers, and other local actors.

Many participants express stronger relationships of trust with these actors than with formal institutions, largely because of their proximity to the field and their sustained engagement with workers' lived realities.

### **3.3.2. Recognition of Informal Expertise and Situated Knowledge**

Civil society engagement also plays a role in making visible the knowledge and expertise developed within informal recycling systems. Participants describe how waste pickers acquire highly detailed and practical skills through daily experience, including:

- sorting and categorizing materials,
- identifying recyclable and reusable value,
- understanding price fluctuations and market chains,
- and organizing complex collection networks across urban spaces.

Despite its sophistication, this expertise remains largely unrecognized within official frameworks. Through documentation and advocacy, civil society actors help reframe these workers not as marginal informal laborers, but as environmental and economic actors whose knowledge contributes directly to urban sustainability and recycling systems.

This recognition highlights a broader issue: expertise is not limited to formal institutions, but is also produced through sustained engagement with material environments and economic systems.



### **3.3.3. Lack of Policy Recognition and Institutional Support**

A major concern throughout the discussion is the absence of meaningful public policy and institutional integration for informal waste workers.

Participants highlight several interconnected structural gaps:

#### **Absence of Legal Recognition**

Waste pickers operate without formal labor status, institutional recognition, or regulatory protection, despite their central role in urban recycling systems.

#### **Weak Social Protection**

Workers face significant physical and economic vulnerability, including:

- workplace injuries,
- long-term health risks and aging-related difficulties,
- exposure to harsh environmental conditions,
- and unstable income.

At the same time, they often lack access to:

- healthcare coverage,
- insurance mechanisms,

- retirement protection,
- and stable income systems.

### **Limited Municipal Integration**

Although informal recyclers contribute significantly to waste collection and recycling flows, they are rarely integrated into municipal waste management strategies. Coordination between local authorities, recycling industries, and worker communities remains weak or absent.

#### **3.3.4. Structural Inequalities in Waste Governance**

The discussion reflects broader systemic imbalances in waste governance. Participants describe a system in which:

- recycling economies depend heavily on informal and vulnerable labor,
- waste sorting and recovery rely on manual, low-protected work,
- and environmental risks are disproportionately absorbed by informal workers.

Despite their essential contribution to waste reduction, material recovery, and urban cleanliness, these workers remain largely excluded from formal environmental planning and decision-making processes.

This reveals a structural contradiction: the system depends on their labor while simultaneously excluding them from institutional recognition and protection.

#### **3.3.5. Toward More Inclusive Environmental Governance**

Participants implicitly and explicitly call for more inclusive approaches that would better reflect the realities of existing waste systems. Key directions include:

- recognizing informal recyclers as essential environmental workers,
- integrating waste pickers into municipal waste management strategies,
- improving occupational safety and working conditions,
- expanding access to healthcare and social protection,
- supporting cooperatives and community-based recycling initiatives,
- and strengthening collaboration between municipalities, civil society actors, and worker organizations.

A recurring idea is that effective and sustainable waste governance cannot be achieved without the participation of those already performing the majority of recycling labor in practice.



### 3.3.6. Civil Society as Advocacy and Public Visibility

Beyond support and facilitation, civil society actors also play a broader political role in shaping how informal recycling work is understood publicly. Through documentation, storytelling, and engagement, they help challenge dominant narratives that reduce waste pickers to invisibility or poverty alone.

This work contributes to raising awareness around:

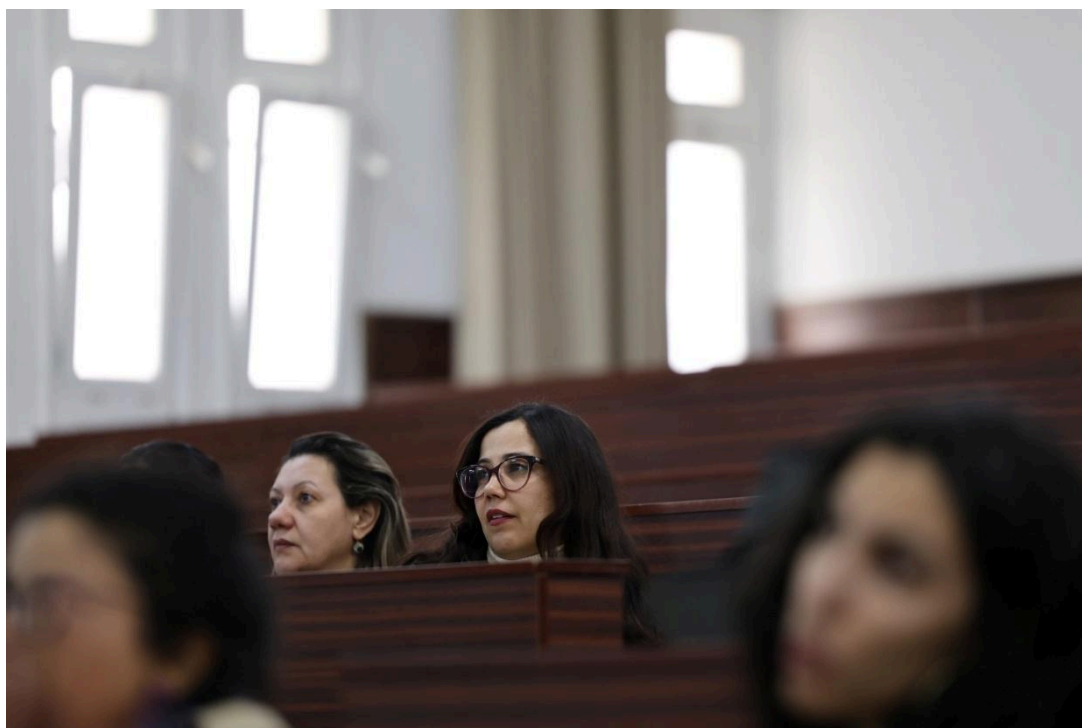
- invisible labor in urban economies,
- environmental justice and inequality,
- economic precarity and survival strategies,
- and the structural importance of informal recycling systems.

In this sense, civil society becomes a key actor in producing public visibility and reframing waste pickers as central contributors to both urban life and environmental sustainability.

## 4. Questions and Reflections from Participants

The discussion session allowed participants to engage with the themes presented and reflect on broader implications.

- the need for formal recognition of informal workers
- the need for the recognition of society who could interfere by sorting the waste
- the role of participatory research in empowering marginalized groups



## **5. Conclusions and Key Points of the Seminar**

### **1. Waste pickers as key actors in environmental sustainability**

The webinar demonstrated that informal waste pickers play a crucial role in recycling systems and urban ecological balance.

### **2. Recognition and dignity as central challenges**

Beyond economic precarity, the issue of social recognition remains fundamental. Efforts to redefine identity and professional status are essential.

### **3. Knowledge co-production as a transformative approach**

Participatory research enables the emergence of alternative knowledge systems that challenge dominant narratives and inform more inclusive policies.

### **4. Structural gaps in protection and policy**

The lack of institutional support, health coverage, and legal recognition continues to expose workers to significant risks.

### **5. Local initiatives as models for change**

Experiences such as those in Nabeul illustrate the potential of community-led solutions in fostering environmental awareness and sustainable practices.