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**POVERTY IN TUNISIA AND THE ROLE OF MICROFINANCE INSTITUTIONS**

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**Abstract**

Microfinance has been identified as an important tool for reducing poverty by increasing the productivity of the poor and thereby promoting economic development.

Generally, the clients targeted by microfinance are in a relatively vulnerable and high-risk situation, with a generally unstable income that sometimes causes them to fall into extreme poverty.

Across our sample only 26.7% have an income above 300 dinars. This result suggests that the surveyed population is very poor, especially when we find that among the 73.3% who have an income below 300 dinars, beneficiaries have a monthly income of less than 60 dinars before financing. This finding suggests that microfinance with its current tools unable to improve the incomes of the poor, so we find that Islamic microfinance can be a new mechanism to improve this sector according to the respondents.

To test our hypotheses we adopted a mixed method that combines both documentary research and survey techniques (questionnaires and interviews).

**Keywords:** microfinance institutions, Islamic finance, poverty, solidarity, micro-credits, income.

**Introduction**

The interference between economics and ethics or economics and religion was an issue from the beginning of economic thought. In his *Mouqadimah*, Ibn Khaldun postulated the necessity of the existence of a form of social solidarity for the creation of a strong civilization, so that microfinance is a hybrid mode of financing responding to a market logic and resulting from a solidarity mechanism. Microfinance has been identified as an important tool for reducing poverty by increasing the productivity of the poor and thus promoting economic development.

Tunisia has been ranked as one of the poorest countries in the North Africa and Middle East region (Mena), according to a report published by the World Bank entitled "Accelerating poverty reduction in Africa for the year 2019. The report, which considers as poor any person living on less than 20.3 dinars a day, indicates that about half a million Tuna They live on 4 small dinars a day." Thus, the NSI is estimated that 15.2% of Tunisians live below the national poverty line, i.e. more than 1.7 million people. Given the international poverty rate, 0.3% of Tunisia ns live in need, that is more than 29,000 people. At the national rate, 1,700,000 Tunisians are poor. According to the INS, a Tunisian living on less than 4.6 dinars a day is considered poor, while according to international standards, a Tunisian living on less than 1.6 dinars a day is considered poor. In addition to poverty rates, the NSI sets an extreme poverty rate. It is estimated at 2.9%, which means that around 300,000 Tunisians are considered extremely poor.

In line with this reflection on the new ways of fighting poverty we wonder about the potential of microfinance in Tunisia?

Islamic microfinance would be a credible alternative to conventional microfinance The role of microfinance in combating population inequality?

The future of conventional microfinance and what are the alternatives?

The choice of this topic was dictated by the situation of economic instability that Tunisia is going through with extreme poverty resulting in poor living conditions, and the increase of prices, the lack of access to basic social services, and the increase of the number of unemployed.

The scientific interest of our work is to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of microfinance as a privileged tool to reduce poverty.

In this sense, the overall objective pursued in this study is to find solutions to the phenomenon of poverty and to investigate the extent to which Islamic microfinance can be an effective tool to combat this phenomenon.

### **1- Theoretical research**

The social movement of 2010 and 2011 brought to light the economic and social difficulties, inequalities and shortcomings of the Tunisian economic model. The most important of these are centered on unemployment and exclusion, particularly of young people, on the regional divide, on the precariousness of work, on corruption and the increasing interventionism of those close to power in the economy.

However, it was reported after 14 January that the unemployment rate among young people aged 18 to 29 would have been close to 30% in 2009, reaching 45% for higher education graduates, while the figures published at the time showed 22.5% for all unemployed graduates.

Each year, about 140,000 people enter the labor market, compared to only 80,000 to 85,000 job creations, mainly located in the greater Tunis area and on the coast.

Table N°1: Unemployment rate in Tunisia by gender

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total	738,4	653,8	609,9	600,5	618,8	632,5	639,0	644,9	634,9	676.6
Man	437,1	396,4	367,2	361,7	361,7	362,5	367,2	370,4	365,4	402.1
Woman	301,3	257,4	242,7	238,8	257,1	270,0	271,8	274,5	269,5	274.5

Source: INS 2019

The poverty rate is now re-evaluated at 24.7% nationally in 2011 and 21% in 2020, and it is likely that the Center-West will experience poverty close to 30% (Beatrice M, Meddeb Het Hamdi, M (2011). Thus, the Sahel region where we prepared our survey has a very high poverty rate in Mahdia as shown in the following table:

Table N°2: Distribution of poverty rate and unemployment rate

	Sousse		Monastir		Mahdia	
	2011	2015	2011	2015	2011	2015
Poverty Rate	14,9 %	16,2%	15,8 %	8,3%	29,8 %	21,1%
Global unemployment rate	13,0%	11,6%	6,1%	6,6%	12,2%	12,2%

Source: Survey, July 2019

## 2- The sampling method

Ghigilione (R) and Matalon (B) in *Enquêtes sociologiques, théorie et pratique*, Paris 1976, stated: "It is very rare that one can study a population exhaustively, that is to say, interview all the members, it would be so long and so costly that it is practically impossible". Given this great difficulty in studying an entire population, it is often decided to study only a fraction or a sample from which conclusions will be drawn for the entire population by extrapolation. Being defined as a subset of the population, a sample, in order to truly deserve this name, must be representative of this population, i.e. it should possess as much as possible all the characteristics of the population from which it is drawn. This representativeness of the sample depends strongly on the method by which it is drawn.

To test the validity of our research hypotheses we have two main methods of sample selection which are random or probabilistic methods and non-probabilistic or empirical methods.

The random sampling method is one that employs random selection techniques. It is defined by the fact that each of the units in the population is given a known equal and non-zero chance of belonging to the sample. This method is said to be probabilistic because the selection of the units in the sample can be compared to a random choice (Ghigliione R and Matalon B (1978). In the empirical sampling method, the selection of the units that make up the sample is not done randomly. It is based on the principle that it is necessary to resort to its methodical and rational spirit in the choice of the units of the sample rather than to rely on the chance.

In the case of our study, we combined the two methods. First, we used the empirical method to select the MFIs that would be included in our sample. Next, we used the random method to select the individuals who will be part of our sample at each MFI. We randomly selected all members of the two MFIs. Given the resources available for our survey, we chose 300 members from each of the two (2) selected MFIs. This gives us a total sample of 600 individuals. The data collected in the field was processed using SPSS version 19 software in order to obtain a profile

of the respondents' situation. This software allowed us to identify trends through calculated percentages.

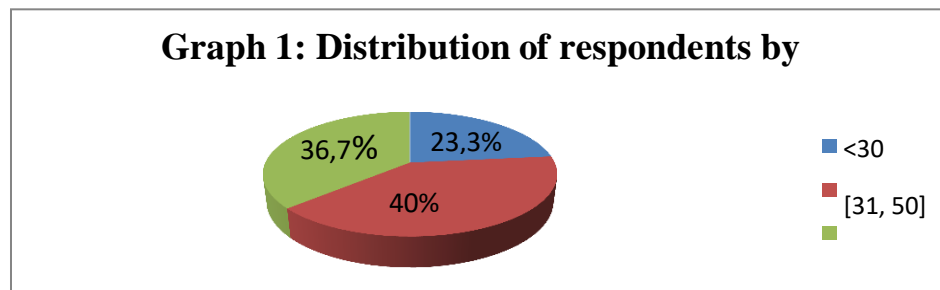
To answer our research question, we formulated hypotheses whose validity we seek to verify in this section.

H1: Microfinance helps improve the income of the poor in Tunisia

H2: Islamic microfinance is an alternative to conventional microfinance in Tunisia

### 3- Analysis of the data

#### a- Socio-demographic characteristics.

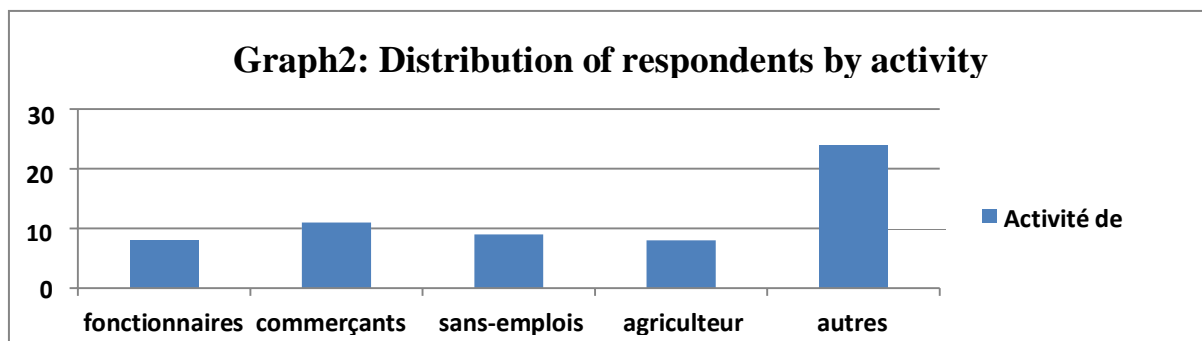


Source: Survey, July 2019

This graph shows a distribution of the beneficiary population by age. This distribution reveals a high concentration of the study population in the age range of 31 to 50 years (240), representing 40% of all beneficiaries.

Clients over 50 years of age are estimated at 220 individuals, representing a total percentage of 36.7%, and clients under 30 years of age represent 23.3% of the sample size

This presentation can be explained by a much more accentuated targeting of promoters between the ages of 31 and 50. It should also be noted that this age group is more receptive to the awareness campaigns of micro-credit institutions. Young people still have a psychological barrier to microfinance institutions.



Source: Survey, July 2019

The data in this graph illustrates that our respondents are in the majority as other activities that represent 40% of the sample. Then in second position, we find the traders (18.3%), then the unemployed (15%). Finally, the rest of the respondents are farmers and civil servants, who represent 13.3% of the respondents.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by gender

Sex	Man	Woman	total
Headcount	230	370	600
Total	38.3	61.7	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

From the data in Table 3, we can see that our sample is composed of 230 men (38.3%) and 370 women (61.7%)

Table 4: Distribution of respondents according to their level of education.

Level of education	Illiterat	Secondary	Primary	Higher	Total
Effectif	50	280	190	80	600
%	8.3	46.7	31.7	13.3	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

This table shows the level of education of MFI members. According to this table, the majority of our respondents have a primary and secondary level of education, with 31.7% and 46.7% respectively. Those with a higher level of education represent only 13.3%. Those who did not attend school accounted for 8.3%.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents according to seniority and according to their request for financing from banks

	Yes	No
Received a loan from an MFI	60,0%	40,0%
Requested a bank	36,7%	63,3%

Source: Survey, July 2019

We notice that 40% of the respondents made their credit to the MFI for the first time and that 60% are former clients.

According to the same table 5 there are 36.7% of the respondents who have already solicited the banks and while 63.3% solicit directly the microfinance institution.

**b- Socio-economic characteristics**

Table 6: Distribution of respondents according to their monthly income before having access to this financing

Monthly Income	<60	60-120	>120	< 300	300-500	500-1000	>1000	Total
Number	60	30	120	230	110	40	10	600
Percentage	10	5	20	38.3	18.3	6.7	1.7	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

This table shows the distribution of respondents according to monthly income before accessing the financing, we notice that 38.3% of respondents with an income below 300 dinars, as well as 120 people with an income below 120 is 20% and 18, 3%(110 people) with an income between 300 and 500 dinars. The others are distributed as follows: 60 people have income below 60 dinars with a percentage of 10%, 30 people have an income between 60 and 120 is represented 5% and 10 people are income exceeds 1000 dinars and represents 1.7%.

**c- MFIs' funding portfolio**

Table 7: Distribution of respondents by loan amount

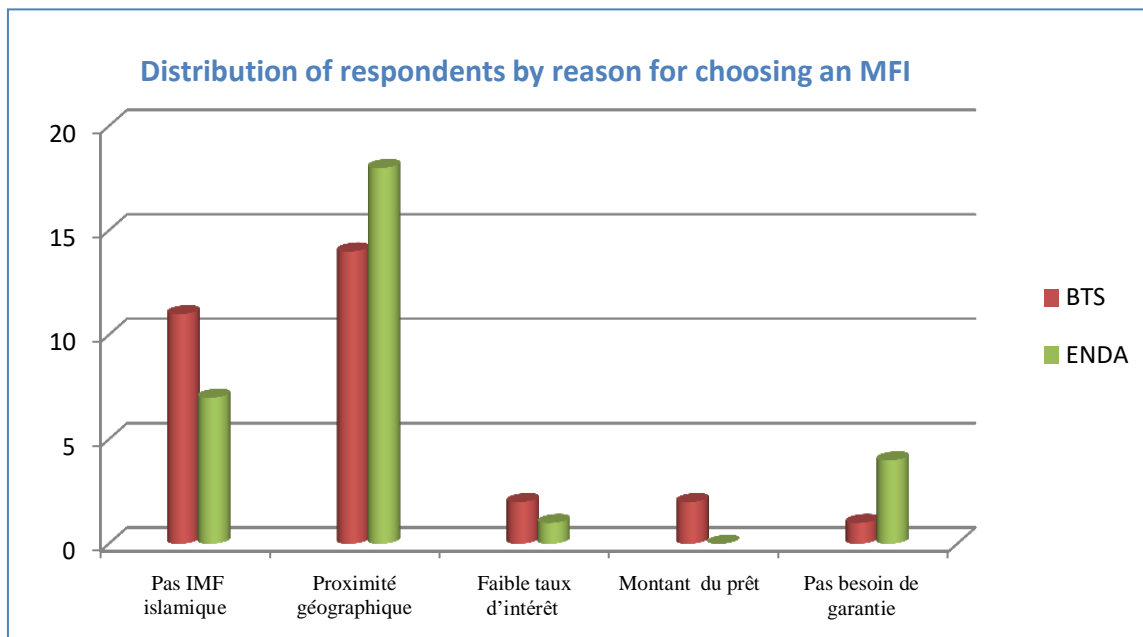
Loan amount	500	500-1000	1000-3000	3000-4000	4000-5000	>5000	Total
Number	90	230	230	30	10	10	600
Percentage	15	38.3	38.3	5	1.7	1.7	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

Table N°7 informs us about the structure of the sample in terms of financing obtained. The majority of the beneficiaries of financing from MFIs have obtained credits whose amounts are higher than 3000DT without exceeding 4000DT or in the range [500-1000]. Those who have a credit between 3000 and 4000 dinars present only 5%. According to this table there is only one person who has benefited from an amount between 4000 and 5000 dinars and one person with an amount higher than 5000 dinars or 1.7%.

d) Reasons for choosing an MFI in the Sahel

Graph N° 3: Reasons for choosing an MFI in Tunisia



Source: Survey, July 2019

This graph provides information on the factors that determine the choice of MFI clients (BTS, ENDA) in Tunisia:

The main reason that emerges from this analysis is geographical proximity such that 140 people choose BTS and 180 people choose ENDA are respectively represent 46.66% and 60%.

The absence of an Islamic microfinance institution is the second most important reason for choosing an MFI. It represents 18.3% of BTS clients and 11.7% of ENDA clients.

The third reason is the lack of guarantee which encourages 50 people to choose their institution as such: 40 people from ENDA or 6.7% and 10 people from BTS or only 1.7%.

The fourth reason is the low interest rate according to 30 people: 20 from BTS with 3.4% and 10 from ENDA with 1.7%. Finally, only 20 people choose BTS because of the size of the loan amount with a percentage of 3.4%.

#### d- Evaluation of the performance of MFIs in Tunisia

Contribution of MFIs to the improvement of their clients' incomes - distribution of respondents according to funding result

This table shows the influence of the loans received on the income of the beneficiaries. According to the table, out of the 600 loan recipients, 310 or 51.66% think that these loans have enabled them to increase their income. On the other hand, 290 (48.34%) said the opposite.

Table 8: Distribution of respondents according to the loan contribution

	An improvement of your activities	An increase in your income	No improvement	More expenses	Total
Number	210	80	200	110	600
%	35	13.3	33.3	18.3	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

According to this table: Funding improves activities by 35%, increases income by 13.3%, on the other hand it adds expenses to 18.3% (110 people) and 200 people experience no improvement with a percentage of 33.3%.

**Evaluation of the quality of MFI services**

The evaluation of the quality of the MFIs' services is based on the level of client satisfaction with their services, as summarized in the following table

Table 9: Distribution of respondents according to the services provided

	Not satisfied	Satisfied	Total
Number	460	140	76,7%
%	76,7%	23,3%	23,3%

Source: Survey, July 2019

Through the data in table N°9, 76.7% of the respondents are not satisfied with the services provided, while 23.3% are totally satisfied.

**e-The limits of conventional microfinance in Tunisia**

Table 10: Number of MFI clients according to reasons for dissatisfaction

	High interest rate	Processing time for files	Short repayment period	Services provided by MFIs	Poor staff reception	Insufficient credit amount
Number	270	130	170	50	30	370

Source: Survey, July 2019

Through the data of this table, we notice that our respondents have in majority found that the amount of credit is insufficient Then, some customers have manifested of them show this dissatisfaction the high interest rates and the short repayment terms.



Apart from the other reasons for dissatisfaction, only a small number think that the services rendered by MFIs and the poor reception of staff are a problem.

Table 11: Distribution of respondents according to change in income

	increase in income	decrease in income	Total
Number	310	290	600
Pourcentage	51,66%	48,34%	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

This table shows the influence of the loans received on the beneficiaries' income. According to the table 51.66% of the beneficiaries believe that the loans obtained from the MFIs allowed them to increase their income. On the other hand, 290 (48.34%) said the opposite.

For those who believe that the loans have not allowed their income (48, 34%), we tried to identify the determining reasons for the evolution of income downward. The results of this test are summarized in the following table:

Table 12: distribution of respondents according to the reasons for the drop in income

The reason	Unprofitable project	various difficulties	use of credit for current expenses	Total
Effectif	80	80	130	290
%	27.58	27.58	44.84	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

According to the data in this table, 80 or 27.58% of the beneficiaries of loans from the MFIs who had a drop in their income after receiving the loan were faced with various difficulties, 27.58% whose projects were unprofitable and 44.84% who used their loans for current expenses

Table 13: Distribution of respondents according to the possibility of change.

Possibility to change	Number	Percentage
Yes	520	86,7%
No	80	13,3%
Total	600	100,0%

Source: Survey, July 2019

This table provides information on the possibility of changing the institution of the beneficiaries after having received the credit. According to the data in this table, 86.7% say that it is possible to change the institution. 13.3% do not like the change.

Table 14: Distribution of respondents according to reasons for change

Reasons for change	More expensive products	More complex products	Products not compatible with our religion	Lack of choice	Total
Number	120	60	260	80	520
%	23.07	11.54	50	15.39	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

Through the data in this table, we notice that 50% of our respondents have noticed a change in the institution because the products not compatible with our religion. Then, 23.07% noted a change by the fact that the products are more expensive and 11.54% that the products are more complex. On the other hand, 8 people, i.e. 15.39%, note a change with a lack of choice.

F-Islamic microfinance: a potential alternative?

Table 15: Distribution of respondents according to knowledge of Islamic finance

knowledge of Islamic finance	Number	Percentage
Yes	30	5,0%
No	570	95,0%
Total	600	100,0%

Source: Survey, July 2019

According to this table, only 30 people have knowledge of Islamic finance products and among the most known products are Murabahah and Musharakah (Table 16).

Table 16: Distribution of respondents according to the most known Islamic finance product

The most popular products	Number	Percentage
Mourabaha	10	33,34%
Moucharaka	20	66,66%
Total	30	100%

Source: Survey, July 2019

Table 17: Distribution of respondents according to desire for Islamic financing

applied for funding	Number	Percentage
Yes	550	91,7%
No	50	8,3%
Total	600	100,0%

Source: Survey, July 2013

This table shows that if there are Islamic microfinance institutions, 91.7% will have requested funding and 8.3% will remain loyal to conventional microfinance. When MFI clients were asked about the reasons for choosing Islamic financing, the majority cited Shari'a compliance as the reason.

Table 18: Distribution of respondents by reason for choosing Islamic financing

The reason for choosing	Shari'a compliant	Loan size	need for collateral	Profitable	Total
Effectif	410	70	10	60	550
%	74.55	12.72	1.82	10.91	100

Source: Survey, July 2019

70 people or 12.72% who have the desire to choose Islamic finance according to the reason of the importance of loan size and 10.91% believe that the loan is profitable against 10 people chooses Islamic microfinance according to the reason of lack of guarantee.

### **3- Interpretation of the results:**

This part of our work consists of interpreting the results of the survey in order to verify the research hypotheses on the one hand and to develop suggestions for solutions to the problems related to the phenomenon studied on the other.

This interpretation of the results will focus on the following points: the socio-demographic and professional situation of the beneficiaries, microfinance as a tool to improve the income of the poor and the future of conventional microfinance.

#### **a- Socio-demographic and professional situation of the beneficiaries:**

The main goal of MFIs is to improve the standard of living of the most disadvantaged social strata. The female population is the most important one as through our sample "we find that 61.7% are women (table n°3).

This result is consistent with the data published by ENDA in 2008. 71% of the clients are women, so for the BTS (2012) and its associations, we notice that the percentages for women

clients exceed half such as 53.57% in Sousse and 56.59% in Monastir, on the other hand only 39.49% are women in Mahdia.

This result can be argued according to the qualitative study on the gender dimension among Enda inter-arab clients (gender study enda/WWB 2008) by the vulnerability of women: They are less present in decision-making positions (public service 15%, private sector 10% and agricultural sector 16%) and less active (25% of the active population) and they often have only very low incomes, which does not allow them to make profits and to be able to save, and this is justified by our sample such as 13.3% are civil servants and more than 40% are worked in different fields, neither traders nor farmers, according to their skills (see table No. 2 and graph No. 2) this reflects the profile of the strata targeted by MFIs.

Thus, according to the table n°4 of our sample, this phenomenon can be explained by the level of education which shows that more than 78% are primary and secondary level, on the other hand the higher level is only 13, 3%. This state of affairs makes the female population unaware of the presence of development initiatives in the locality, especially in the rural area, which influences their income.

**b- Microfinance as a tool to improve the income of the poor**

Through our sample and as shown in table N°6, only 26.7% have an income higher than 300 dinars spread over 3 areas, the first where the income is between 300 and 500 dinars, that is 18.3%, the second where the income belongs to the interval of 500 to 1000 dinars, that is 6.7% and the last one includes 1 person, that is 1.7%, whose income is higher than 1000 dinars.

This result shows that the surveyed population is very poor especially when we find that there are among the 73.3% who have an income lower than 300 dinars, of the beneficiaries have a monthly income lower than 60 dinars before the financing (see the data in table 6).

This leaves us to propose the following questions:

Do the various credits offered help customers to improve their income and its conditions of view or the opposite and what are its explanations retained?

Table 19: Distribution of respondents by reason for choice

No Islamic MFI	Customers BTS	%	Customers ENDA	%
Geographical proximity	110	36,67	70	23,33
Low interest rate	140	46,66	180	60
Loan amount	20	6,67	10	3,33
No need for collateral	20	6,67	40	13,34

Source: Survey, July 2019

It should be noted that 13.34% and 3.33% of ENDA beneficiaries chose it respectively according to the size of the loan amount and the low interest rate (see table 19) and that 6.67% of

respondents chose the BTS for the low interest rate and the size of the loan amount (see table 19). These results show that the majority of respondents are not satisfied with the amount of the loan and 370 respondents indicate that the amount is insufficient.

This inadequacy of the loan amount means that the beneficiary's capacity to carry out his activities is not strengthened. Their capital is crumbled and this does not really have a positive effect on their activities.

Table N°7 shows that 230 of the beneficiaries their loans, that is to say 38,3% do not exceed 1000 dinars and 38,3% do not exceed 3000 dinars. This insufficiency obliges the beneficiaries to take sometimes in all illegality two or more loans at the same time with several mutual societies. This practice puts indeed the interested party in a vicious circle and he finds himself in the incapacity to maximize his incomes as shows the table N°9 such as 51,6% of the respondents estimate no improvement but more loads and thus the birth of new unemployed.

It should be noted that half of the beneficiaries of loans, i.e. 51.66%, despite the inadequacy of their amounts, experience an increase in their income. On the other hand, 48.34% justify the decrease in their income by the use of the credit for current expenses and the lack of

profitability of the project (see data in table 12). Among the explanations for this decrease in income is the total absence of training before the credit was made available, since 98.3% had no training (see table 25).

Table 20: Breakdown of surveys by course

Training	Number	Percentage
Training in technology	0	0%
Management training	100	1,7%
Other training	0	0%
No training	59	98,3%
Total	60	100%

Source: Survey, July 2019

Training is a very strong demand from all beneficiaries to improve their knowledge and skills, and it is an opportunity to bring together stakeholders in a sector of activity to share their experiences and exchange best practices and techniques.

The training is not limited to simply providing knowledge on bookkeeping and business management techniques, but necessarily includes insights into the market potential and deep exploration of innovative and growth-oriented niches.

It is noted that after obtaining credit there are still more than 43.33% of beneficiaries are income less than 300 dinars, is despite that there is a percentage of beneficiaries is 29.99% his income exceeds 500 dinars. This finding suggests that microfinance with its current tools unable to improve the income of the poor. This result converges with that of Philippe Ortoli in 1997: "Indeed, beyond a certain threshold of activity, it no longer provides an answer to development because of its limited amount and short-term deadlines unsuitable for profitable medium and long-term projects. Moreover, because it benefits more the "rich" borrowers than the most destitute borrowers.

**c- The future of conventional microfinance**

The majority of MFI beneficiaries state that their needs are not met (see table 14). This is explained by several causes, notably dissatisfaction with the amount obtained by the MFI. In fact, many of them are unaware of the high interest rate applied to them, which is why they are unable to repay their loans on time. For some members, the conditions for granting credit are complicated, especially the guarantee by a client and the time required to process files, as shown in table 10.

Although microfinance is an important tool in the fight against poverty, it is not one that will transform the situation of the poor. It is not a miracle solution to poverty. It is rather an instrument that can be used to eradicate poverty. This requires looking for an alternative that constitutes techniques and procedures of application.

Table 19 shows that the majority chooses ENDA and BTS for one reason is the geographical proximity is 60% for ENDA and 46.66% for BTS, the second reason is the lack of choice is on all the absence of Islamic microfinance institutes is 36.67% for BTS and 23.33%. those who show that the beneficiaries seek the change of their institution if possible (see table No. 19). Among the reasons for change is the non-compatibility of the products to the religion is 50%, as well as the products are more expensive is 23.07% (see table No. 15).

These results show the inability of conventional microfinance to overcome the problems of the poor and indicate in parallel the needs of the beneficiaries to a new alternative which is Islamic microfinance, despite the fact that only 5% of the respondents have knowledge of Islamic finance products and among its most known products are the Murabahah and the Musharakah (see data in table 17)

Thus still in the same sense that Islamic microfinance as an alternative financing, we ask the following question on our sample "If there are Islamic MFIs: would you have applied for financing?"

The answer to this question by yes represents 91.7% of the respondents, which shows that beneficiaries are very interested in Islamic microfinance for the following reasons

The products that comply with the Shari'a is 74.55%, the importance of loan size is 12.72%, the profitability with their products is 10.91% and the partial absence of guarantee is 1.82%. Despite

the importance of conventional microfinance in the development of the Tunisian economy, and especially in rural areas, MFIs are unable to find perfect solutions to improve the situation of the poor.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, the clients targeted by microfinance are relatively subject to a vulnerable and high-risk situation, with a generally unstable income that sometimes causes them to fall into extreme poverty.

Across our sample only 26.7% have an income above 300 dinars. This result suggests that the surveyed population is very poor, especially when we find that among the 73.3% who have an income below 300 dinars, beneficiaries have a monthly income of less than 60 dinars (the equivalent of 1 euro per day) before the financing. This finding suggests that microfinance with its current tools is unable to improve the income of the poor. The majority of MFI beneficiaries state that their needs are not being met and seek to change their MFI if possible to an institution capable of improving their incomes. 91.7% of respondents are very interested in Islamic microfinance despite the fact that only 5% have knowledge of Islamic finance products.

To conclude, we can also note a particularity in Islamic microfinance, which is the non-existence of an interest rate or even of any form of interest. This will strongly encourage micro-entrepreneurs to enter the financial system and the Tunisian economic pie is expanding more and more.

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