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Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia: A Storm in a Teacup?

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This paper investigates the impact of sub-Saharan African immigrants on the Tunisian labour market as well as their labour market integration and social inclusion compared to other immigrants, with a focus on the migration influx since the Tunisian uprising of 2010–2011.

- Using micro-level annual household labour force surveys and data from the last two population censuses on immigrants' concentration by country of origin, we identify the impact of sub-Saharan Africans on the Tunisian labour market.
- The paper uses the first Tunisia Households International Migration Survey (Tunisia-HIMS) to understand the sub-Saharan immigrants' labour market outcomes and their social integration compared to immigrants of other origin.
- Using a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design, we find a negative and significant immediate impact of sub-Saharan immigrants on the average annual earnings of local workers in micro-businesses in the retail trade and food services between 2011 and 2014. After 2014, there is a significant negative impact on employment in low value-added sectors, particularly in the building sector.
- The Multidimensional Integration Index results show that social and psychological integration is particularly challenging for sub-Saharan immigrants, especially for young people, the non-educated, and women.

CONTEXT

Immigration impacts sectors and genders differently, requiring tailored employment strategies. In sectors such as agriculture, where female employment is negatively affected by immigration from sub-Saharan Africa, upskilling programmes for native women are needed. By contrast, industrial sectors benefiting male employment from immigration should focus on leveraging complementary skills of foreign and native male workers. The findings also emphasise the need for robust social and psychological integration programmes for sub-Saharan migrants, including language and cultural orientation, community engagement, and mental health support.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia has been the subject of a fierce debate, widely reported by national and international media since the Arab uprisings of 2011. The outbreak of the Libyan conflict at the end of February 2011 forced hundreds of thousands of foreign workers to move to Tunisia in the hope of returning to their countries. The lack of control over Tunisian borders in the days following the revolution allowed several thousand people of different nationalities to leave Tunisia for Europe, particularly Italy. The re-establishment of Tunisia's border control and the stricter measures implemented by the European Union to combat irregular migration have gradually transformed Tunisia from a transit country into a host country for many sub-Saharan Africans. According to Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics (INS 2021), the number of sub-Saharan immigrants stood at just 7,000 in 2010, a figure that tripled to 21,000 by 2021. However, estimates from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs indicate a much higher number, suggesting that around 57,000 sub-Saharan immigrants were living in Tunisia in 2019 (MMC 2021). As a small developing economy experiencing economic and social instability since the Arab uprisings of 2011, Tunisia faces significant challenges due to the rapid increase of sub-Saharan immigrants. Their social and economic integration in Tunisia as well as their impact on the local labour markets raise significant concerns. The influx of migrants has increased the overall labour supply, the effects of which depend on the degree of substitutability or complementarity between immigrant labour, local labour, and other factors of production (Borjas 2003; Card 2001).

The Tunisian authorities still lack a comprehensive strategy to manage the inflow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Post-2011 governments have focused on security and short-term measures, neglecting the economic, social, and psychological integration of these immigrants and their impact on native labour market. Given these challenges, this study aims to inform the debate on the relationship between immigration and the local labour market in developing countries. Specifically, the paper examines the impact of immigrants, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa, on annual average earnings per Tunisian worker, employment, unemployment, and labour market participation. Additionally, the study explores how well immigrants integrate into the local labour market and social fabric, including access to social services, security, and social protection.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

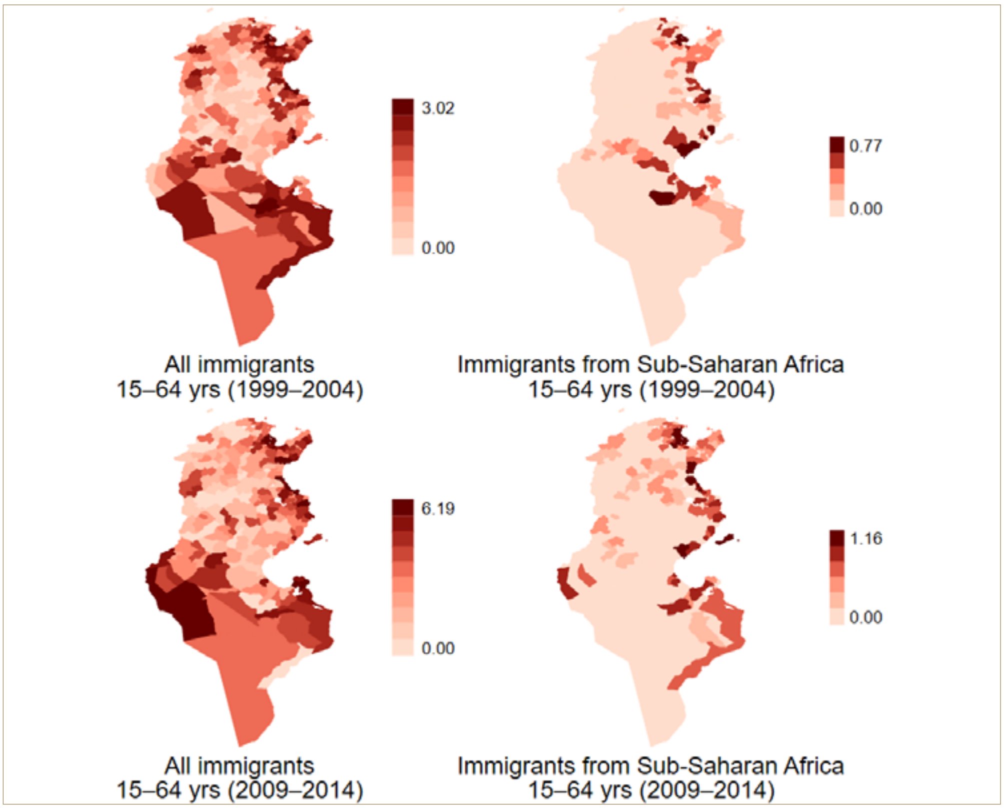
This study combines three main sources of data. To identify the geographical concentration of sub-Saharan immigrants at the governorate and delegation levels, we use the 2004 and 2014 population censuses (INS 2005, 2014). These censuses provide detailed information on the nationality and location of each immigrant, allowing us to group them into five categories: North African (from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Sudan), "Middle East" (from Syria, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Oman), sub-Saharan, European, and Other. The second data source is the Tunisian National Survey on Population and Employment (ENPE), compiled and published annually by the National Institute of Statistics (INS) since 2000 (INS 2013, 2016). The third data source is the first national Households International Migration Survey, Tunisia-HIMS 2021 (INS 2021). Conducted as part of the Mediterranean programme (MED-HIMS), this survey aims to enhance the understanding of international migration in Tunisia by addressing data gaps and identifying relevant indicators.

The empirical strategy used here compares labour market outcomes – such as employment and unemployment rates, annual earnings, and labour market participation – between delegations with high and low immigrant concentrations before and after 2011 and 2014. Immigrant proportions are calculated from 2004 and 2014 census data, focusing on the working-age population (15–64 years). Delegations with significant increases in immigrant numbers form the treated group, while those with low proportions serve as the control group. To evaluate the impact of immigrants on local labour market outcomes, we employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) estimation at both regional (delegation) and individual levels (see, for example, Fallah, Krafft, and Wahba 2019; Aksu, Erzan, and Kırdar 2022; Tumen 2016; Edo and Rapoport 2019; and Foged and Peri 2016 for recent empirical literature on the causal relationship between immigration and natives' labour market outcomes).

TUNISIA'S IMMIGRATION DEMOGRAPHICS

In 2004 the foreign population in Tunisia was estimated at 35,192 (0.36 per cent of the total population), compared to 37,954 in 1994 and 38,040 in 1984. Of this group, 63 per cent came from North Africa (35 per cent) and Europe (28 per cent), while 24 per cent were from sub-Saharan Africa, primarily residing in the Greater Tunis area (94.4 per cent). By 2014 the number of foreign residents increased by approximately 17,808, reaching 53,000, reflecting a 33.6 per cent growth rate compared to the 10.8 per cent growth rate of the total population during the same period. Most individuals arrived in Tunisia following the 2011 uprisings. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of immigrants aged 15–64 across 264 delegations in Tunisia based on the 2004 census data. Coastal delegations, particularly those in the chief towns of the governorates, have the highest immigrant density up to 3.02 per cent of the native local population. The cities of Tunis, Ariana, Sfax, and Sousse have the highest density of sub-Saharan immigrants, while interior delegations have almost none. In 2014, similar to the 2004 pattern, most immigrants were concentrated in Tunisia's coastal delegations. Notably, the concentration of sub-Saharan and North African immigrants increased significantly compared to other groups. Sub-Saharan Africans comprised 1.16 per cent of the total national population (up from 0.77 per cent in 2004).

Figure 1. Share of Immigrants by Delegation and Country of Origin in 2004 and 2014, 15–64 Years



Sources: Author's own design based on INS 2005 and 2014.

The 2021 Tunisia-HIMS reveals several trends. Out of an estimated population of 11.7 million in January 2020, 58,990 were foreigners (about 0.5 per cent of the total population). Compared to the 2014 census, this represents an increase of approximately 6,000 immigrants, marking an 11.4 per cent growth rate, compared to a 6.2 per cent growth rate in the general population. Among sub-Saharan immigrants aged 15 and older, 67 per cent are men, 68 per cent are aged 15–29, and 77 per cent are single. Approximately 98 per cent of sub-Saharan immigrants entered Tunisia after 2011. They are primarily concentrated in Greater Tunis (54 per cent) and the central east (41 per cent). Ivorians represent one-third of sub-Saharan nationals, while individuals from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, and Mali each account for about one-tenth.

IMPACT OF IMMIGRANTS ON LOCAL LABOUR MARKET OUTCOMES

The results when the outcome variables are the employment and unemployment rates at the delegation level are as follows: For both variables, the impacts of immigrant presence, regardless of origin, are not statistically significant, indicating no effect on the local labour market. However, when controlling for differences in education, age, marital status, sex ratio, and urbanisation rate between the control and treatment groups, we find that the arrival of immigrants from certain origins significantly decreases employment opportunities for native employees and increases unemployment rates. In the short term (the first three years after the Tunisian revolution of 2011), this is not relevant for sub-Saharan immigrants, who do not have a significant impact on the local labour market. After 2014, on the other hand, their presence leads to a significant negative impact on employment in low value-added sectors, particularly in the building and civil engineering sectors for urban areas. The impacts on the average of earnings per worker for micro-firms with fewer than six employees are both negative and statistically significant for migrants of sub-Saharan African and European origin.

By combining the results for employment and unemployment rates with those of average earnings per worker, we can conclude that, in the short term, delegations receiving a higher number of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa have not experienced a decline in employment but have notably adjusted wages downwards, particularly affecting employees in micro-businesses. In these firms, the average earnings of native workers employed in retail trade, accommodation, and food services have been particularly negatively impacted. By contrast, delegations hosting additional labour from European countries recorded a drop in both employment rate and earnings per worker, particularly among those employed in micro-firms.

IMMIGRANTS' INTEGRATION IN THE LOCAL LABOUR MARKET AND SOCIAL FABRIC

The relevant literature has proposed several measures to assess the degree of migrants' integration in their host countries. Recently, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in partnership with the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL), developed a multidimensional approach to measure integration outcomes (IOM 2023). The IOM defines integration as "the degree to which migrants have the knowledge and capacity to build a successful, fulfilling life in the host country" (IOM 2022). Following the IOM's practical guidance on the design, implementation, and monitoring of integration assistance, we have developed a Multidimensional Integration Index (M2I) specifically to assess the degree of immigrant integration in Tunisia. Based on the Tunisia-HIMS 2021 survey, we identified a set of 12 indicators covering three dimensions: economic, social, and psychological (see Table 1).

Table 1. Multidimensional Integration Index (M2I) Dimensions and Indicators

Dimension (as defined by IOM 2023)	Indicator (based on Tunisia-HIMS 2021)
Economic: "Captures income, employment, satisfaction with employment situation and the ability to meet different levels of unexpected expenses."	• Having a job (= 1 if yes) • Current work situation being better or unchanged (= 1 if yes) • Having a higher level of education (= 1 if yes)
Social: "Captures social ties and interactions with nationals in the host country, as well as bridging social capital as evidenced by participation in organizations with nationals."	• Having the intention of staying in Tunisia (= 1 if yes) • Having healthcare insurance (= 1 if yes) • Having excellent/good neighbourhood attitude (= 1 if yes)
Psychological: "Captures respondents' feeling of connection with host country, their wish to continue living there and their sense of belonging."	• Being treated with respect (= 1 if yes) • Not being treated unfairly • Some people thinking they're better than you (= 1 if no) • Being subjected to threats or harassment (= 1 if no) • Experiencing racial/colour discrimination (= 1 if no) • Having heard people making (negative) comments about immigrants (= 1 if no)

Sources: Based on IOM 2013; IOM 2022; and INS 2021.

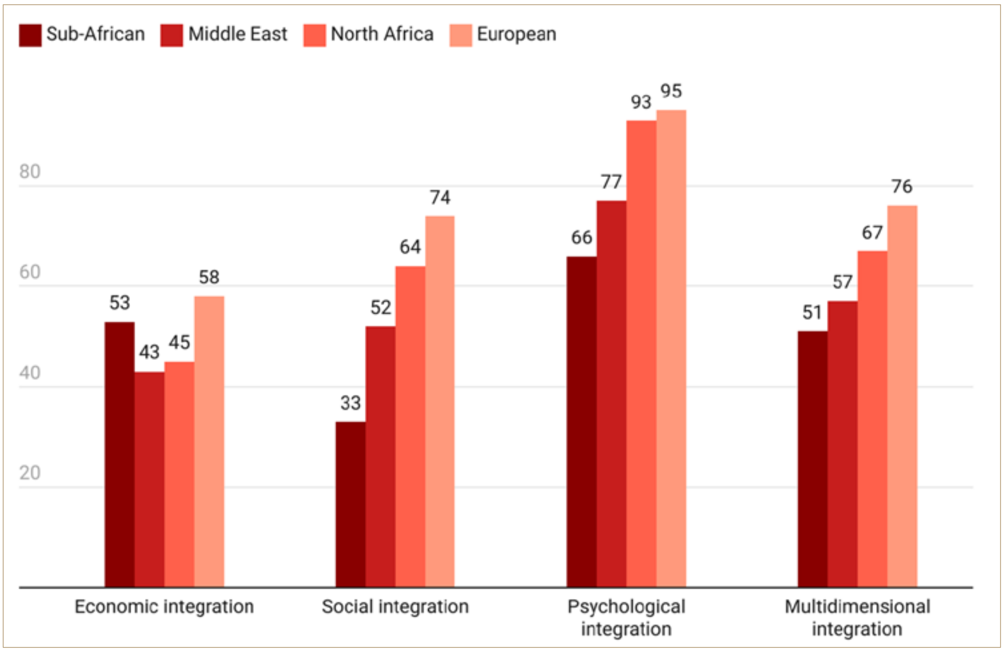
Based on the Tunisia-HIMS survey, about 46 per cent of sub-Saharan immigrants were employed at the time of the survey, and 78 per cent feel that their professional situation in Tunisia is better than it was in their countries of origin before migrating. Regarding educational attainment, only 34 per cent of sub-Saharan immigrants have a higher level of education. The majority of sub-Saharan immigrants view Tunisia as a transit country, with only 36 per cent intending to stay. In terms of access to health and social protection, the Tunisia-HIMS survey shows that nearly 90 per cent of working-age sub-Saharan immigrants do not benefit from these services, and only 11 per cent have health insurance. All these percentages are well below those for immigrants from other parts of the world.

The last chart in Figure 2 shows that sub-Saharan immigrants are the least integrated across all three dimensions combined, as measured by the M2I index. Specifically, only 51 per cent of sub-Saharan immigrants are multidimensionally integrated into the local market and social fabric, compared to 57 per cent for immigrants from Middle East countries, 67 per cent for those from North Africa, and 76 per cent of European immigrants. Additionally, only 33 per cent of sub-Saharan immigrants are socially integrated, and 66 per cent feel psychologically integrated.

The findings also show that men, regardless of their country of origin, are more likely to be integrated than women. Better educated immigrants, particularly those with tertiary education, are more likely to integrate into the local labour market and social fabric compared to non-educated immigrants. Integration becomes easier with age, as older immigrants (beyond 29 years) show higher integration levels than younger ones (15 to 29 years). Additionally, immigrants living in the Northwest region find it more difficult to integrate compared to those in Greater Tunis. Overall, sub-Saharan immigrants are less integrated into Tunisia's labour market and social fabric compared to immigrants from other world regions.

In a nutshell, this paper shows that sub-Saharan African immigrants create significant ripples in Tunisia's labour market, though not the "storm" threatening its stability as suggested by heated public and political debate. Sub-Saharan immigrants notably affect wage levels in micro-firms and reduce native employment opportunities by about 1 per cent, particularly among workers with similar skill levels (substitutability effect). The impact is distinctly gender-biased, with female workers bearing a greater burden compared to males, especially in agriculture. Paradoxically, male industrial workers benefit from immigrant labour through complementary workforce effects. Furthermore, the study highlights integration challenges, as sub-Saharan African migrants exhibit the lowest levels of integration among all immigrant groups.

Figure 2. Immigrants' Integration into Local Labour Market, by Origin



Source: Author's own design based on INS 2021.

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IMPRINT

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