**Summary**

This dissertation addresses the living conditions of young people in Tunisia against the backdrop of urban inequality. The research problem starts with observing income strategies for coping with insecurity and struggles for participation in a setting that is characterised by structural unemployment as well as informal and precarious work. While socio-spatial seclusion denies many young people the right to take part in "the total cityscape", they also remain excluded from the formal labour market and secure employment. Access to the labour market is often limited to precarious employment. Facing this predicament, they dependent on generating alternative socio-institutional resources that provide a cushion against insecurity. Drawing on this observation I raise the issue whether provisional income strategies and self-employment are a realistic alternative to precarious wage labour.

At the macro level, the research question explores the agency of Tunisian youth and young adults who are exposed to multidimensional forms of exclusion. My hypothesis is that individual agency is by and large determined by structural conditions on the labour market, the socio-institutional environment for income generating strategies and the socio-spatial context of local living conditions. But beyond their impact on the acting subject, they also bring far-reaching consequences for ‘the right to the city’. The interplay between ordinary conditions of the everyday and individual life situations produces a continuum of insecurity along which individuals may be placed. This continuum implies a dialectical tension between inclusion and exclusion. Approaching the research problem from such an angle may cast a more nuanced light on young people as actors in the urban context while opening new perspectives on unemployment in North Africa.

In the context of growing insecurity resulting from globalization informality and precarity have emerged as prevalent research topics. While globalization led to the informalisation and precaritisation of employment in the Global North, it also produced new forms of precariousness in the Global South. In Tunisia, flexibilisation and precaritisation of employment can be considered as consequences of the debt crisis and structural adjustment programs introduced in 1986. These reforms came along with a restructuring of the public sector and the Tunisian welfare regime. In the context of liberalisation and privatisation individual strategies to overcome unemployment and precariousness increasingly fell in line with policies of the Tunisian government, that came to rely on market-oriented approaches for addressing the social question. In accordance with the principle of 'self-help' the focus of state employment policy shifted to income-generating activities and self-employment. After the political uprising of 2011 microfinance organisations gained considerable momentum when the expanded promotion of microentrepreneurship brought about a new microcredit boom.

The empirical part of the dissertation draws on both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data is based on field research in the district of Ettadhamen which is in the north-western periphery of the Greater Tunis area. Throughout the years 2012-13 I conducted semi-structured interviews with adolescents and young adults in the age range of 19 and 40 years. The total of the analysed material comprises approximately 40 qualitative interviews, 16 of which were selected 16 to be analysed as case studies, in addition to numerous informal conversations with informants. The quantitative data was collected as part of a representative study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in May 2016. The analysed sample includes 1000 young people in the age range of 16 to 30 years, who mostly belong to the urban middle classes.

The research approach is both inter- and transdisciplinary in as much as it combines analytical perspectives from urban sociology, developmental geography, and labour sociology. While these disciplines are crucial for informing the debate on the political economy of youth the approach also requires a multilevel analysis, embedding life situations in a broader context. This context is constituted through a historical background of urban inequality as well as processes of informalisation and precaritisation that have affected Tunisia since the 1970s. At the same time, it covers more recent socio-economic and political dynamics that brought about the uprising of 2011 and have had a continuous impact in the first five years ever since the regime collapsed. Both the uneven development and an inequitable spatial planning have produced regional disparities between coastal regions and the interior of the country. As the Tunisian economy shifted towards liberalisation and became more export oriented these policies concentrated political-administrative and economic functions in large cities on the coast. A growing informal sector, recurring trends of internal and external migration as well as informal trade in border regions, where state influence remained limited after the political uprising, are factors that underline the longstanding effects of marginalisation after decades of systematic neglect of interior regions.

Urban inequality as a field of research has emerged from sociological and geographical debates on the urban question in the Global North and in the Global South. In this dissertation the focus lies on the effects of urban development processes on everyday living conditions and the ensuing local implications for the right to the city. In the Greater Tunis area, socio-spatial polarisation is particularly pronounced in the urban periphery where it becomes visible in the contrast between large-scale urban projects and informal settlements. However, taking informal trade as a case in point, one can also observe how everyday forms of economic practice have been institutionalised in centrally located urban spaces of Tunis while being subjected to recurring interventions by state agents.

The context of urban inequality is discussed in greater detail by looking at the urban district known as Ettadhamen, which is in the north-western periphery of the Greater Tunis area. The emergence of this district is due to internal migration from the countryside to the city as well as intra-metropolitan population movements and the proliferation of peri-urban housing. The history of this district illustrates historical roots of spatial segregation, insufficient economic integration, and social marginalisation. The context that prevailed during the first five years following the uprising attests to several versatile dynamics such as ongoing social protests, widespread intentions among young people to migrate and the influence of the Salafist movement. These dynamics interact with socio-spatial marginalisation processes affecting young people in particular.

The case studies covering the period from 2012 to 2013 focus on young people’s income strategies aiming to secure their livelihood in the present. The only way they can build a solid basis to cushion themselves against insecurity is if they manage to stabilize their income and their employment situation. This holds especially true for residents of marginalized neighbourhoods. Given their situation of socio-spatial seclusion, they either dependent on income opportunities in the proximity-based local economy or they need to develop mobility strategies that enable them to find income and employment beyond the neighbourhood. On a segmented labour market, informal and precarious work substitutes for a lack of decent work among underqualified young people, school dropouts and even young graduates with a school-leaving certificate or vocational training. Informal and precarious work may provide a complementary source of income when wage labour and alternative income strategies go hand in hand with each other. Since welfare mechanisms providing access to basic social benefits are only granted to certain social groups, many young unemployed face intensified economic insecurity.

The findings derived from the analysis of quantitative data suggest that the concept of transition prevalent in youth studies needs to be scrutinized. Life paths showing relatively normal transitions into working life and starting a family contrast with situations of "contained" young people for whom these transitions are delayed or remain blocked. On the one hand, a large proportion of the young population surveyed are confident about their personal prospects. On the other hand, discontinuities in the employment situation led to greater precariousness jeopardizing a future-oriented ability to act. This problem particularly concerns unmarried and unemployed youths having passed a critical age limit and thus find themselves in a limbo. Precarious living situations are widespread among adolescents and young adults. This reality challenges the construction of institutionalised life cycles and linear transition phases.

The data analysis also reveals a certain polarisation in the self-assessment of the economic situation among the young people surveyed. Most of them have no income of their own and they lack basic financial resources. Since public transfer payments are severely restricted, many rely on alternative safety nets such as family ties and informal networks. These ties and networks offer a protective shield against the ongoing precaritisation, which has been increasingly impacting the middle classes. Had the social contract of the Ben Ali regime been based on clientelist mechanisms of redistribution the underlying authoritarian bargains lost their significance during the first five years following the regime change. Owing to political and social instability in this transition period, the state's capacities for fulfilling key functions such as public services have faced great challenges.

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data offers clues to rethink common concepts such as unemployment and inactivity in a more differentiated way. This implies a critique of the political economy debate on youth, which highlights problems such as youth unemployment and underemployment, but ignores the situatedness of individual lives as well as employment and income strategies in the formal or informal sector. As young people get caught up in multidimensional exclusion processes their life situations bundle together different factors they can hardly influence. Shared life circumstances and common living conditions turn into formative experiences for numerous young people. They can be regarded as members of a generation in a broader sense without necessarily representing a common generational consciousness.

# Notes on transcription and terminology

The semi-structured interviews analysed in chapter 5 were largely conducted in Arabic. In most cases, the conversation with the interviewees was conducted in a mixture of Tunisian dialect and Modern Standard Arabic. Expert interviews with representatives of research institutions or civil society organisations were conducted exclusively in French. The foreign-language terms and technical terms mentioned occasionally in text are set in parentheses and highlighted in italics. For Arabic terms I used the transliteration of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG). In the case of place names and proper names, I do not use transliteration and instead stick to the commonly used transcription in the country. Monetary values are mostly indicated in Tunisian dinars (TND)and occasionally in Euros or US dollars. In May 2012, the exchange rate for Tunisian dinars was approx. 1 TND =. 0.49 euros.

# Map Tunisia

Ein Bild, das Text, Karte enthält.

Automatisch generierte Beschreibung

*Figure 1: Map of Tunisia (CIA 2018)*

# Introduction

In the autobiographical novel "Supplice tunisien", Ahmed Manaï (1995: 97ff) who was at the time an international expert for the United Nations and an opponent of the Ben Ali regime describes conditions of the unemployed in Tunisia. After the restructuring of the public sector in the 1980s, a whole generation of young jobseekers were left with little chances of finding a permanent job. Manaï laconically remarks in view of the politically repressive climate that for many young unemployed, the police would have probably been the only hope of getting a job. However, most of them had no choice but to spend their daily lives in coffee places. Years later, this phenomenon is still very much present in Tunisia. Even after the events that brought about the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, it is hard not to notice the numerous unemployed people who kill their time in coffee places, either alone or in groups.

Behind the apparent ubiquity of mass unemployment lies nevertheless a more complex reality. This reality is mired in everyday living and working conditions that people in metropolitan areas of North Africa and in other major cities of the Global South must deal with. In the metropolitan capital of Tunisia, which is relatively well integrated in terms of infrastructure and economic productivity compared to the hinterland, many young people and even adults beyond the age of 30 or 35, remain in a precarious status of makeshift arrangements. While (social-)spatial seclusion undermines their participation in the "total cityscape", many of them are also excluded from formal employment. Access to the labour market is often limited to informal and precarious employment. As much as lethargy and a sense of hopelessness overshadow the life of the unemployed, they struggle daily to gain agency and autonomy. Especially those having to cope with economic insecurity in the present constantly need to look out for new opportunities: the next job as a casual labourer, the prospect of receiving a micro-loan for the expansion of a small petty trade or the possibility of migrating abroad with the help of a relative. Much unlike the phenomenon of the unemployed flocking to coffee places, these dynamics remain concealed from the observer at first sight.

In this dissertation, I investigate urban inequality in the Greater Tunis area and ask how this affects individual life situations. My analysis focuses on working and living conditions in a setting shaped by structural unemployment as well as informal and precarious work. I place this setting in a broader context of regional disparities and socio-spatial fragmentation. Generally speaking, regions and locations in Tunisia are only loosely connected and often include marginalized spaces. This can be deemed an outcome of unequal development processes, particularly between the coastal zones and the hinterland.[[1]](#footnote-1)

From a macro logical perspective, I further explore the agency of Tunisian young adults who develop strategies for coping with different forms of insecurity while being exposed to multidimensional forms of exclusion. The qualitative and quantitative data was collected during research visits in 2012-2013 and 2016. These research visits fell into periods when Tunisia went through a phase of political and social transformation. At that time, the country was experiencing a process of political reorganisation, which was accompanied by heightened social tensions and conflicts between different political forces. Although my research has not remained unaffected by these tensions and conflicts, this dissertation does not focus on individuals or events that were directly involved in political affairs. Much rather, my research interest revolves around forms of economic participation in everyday life. My hypothesis is that structural conditions on the labour market, the socio-institutional environment for income generating strategies and the socio-spatial context of local living conditions by and large predetermine individual agency. But beyond their impact on the individual situation of the acting subject, they also bring far-reaching consequences for ‘the right to the city’.

My academic interest in research topics such as informality and precarity in the Tunisian context stems from a longstanding involvement with the North African region. Throughout my undergraduate and graduate career in Middle Eastern Studies with a focus on development geography at Leipzig University, I was involved in several research projects dealing with livelihoods and livelihood security in rural Morocco. During fieldwork for my master's thesis, I investigated the biographical backgrounds of Moroccan return migrants in the greater Casablanca area. My approach aimed to reconstruct both historical and contemporary migration movements between Morocco and Europe based on individual life trajectories. Insights into rural and urban living contexts allowed me to gain a complementary view of socio-economic changes in the Maghreb region. As a member of the Research Training Group 'Critical Junctures of Globalisation', I put up with the challenge of adopting an approach that enmeshes the local with a global set of problems and places individual life situations in a context of transnational upheavals. In the African context in particular, these upheavals have disrupted established spatial orders, leading in several African states to a loss of the state monopoly over the means of physical force. At the same time, however, they held the potential to reconfigure the relationship between state and society (vgl. Engel & Middell 2005: 27f). The actual goal of my research, namely, to analyse individual life situations among young people in contexts of urban inequality, gradually took shape. The research project was initially guided by the impulsion to go beyond general statements about young people’s lack of economic prospects and high youth unemployment. I instead set my ambition to investigate everyday conditions of individuals affected by exclusion while trying to understand their daily struggles and coping strategies. The decision to do research on Tunisia was not only due to the so-called Arab Spring, which started in the late autumn of 2010. Rather, my intention was to work toward a transnational comparison, positioning specific problems such as urban inequality in the Maghreb vis-a-vis global trends.

The following three insights will first provide an overview of the research topic and its situatedness in spatial and temporal contexts. This shall illustrate objective socio-spatial, economic, and political conditions that have an impact on Tunisian adolescents and young adults. Their life situations will be analysed in chapter 5 within the framework of qualitative case studies. This overview is followed by a discussion of the political context of my research visits in Tunisia, which was shaped by political transformation and economic crisis. Finally, the research question and the structure of this thesis are set out.

## 1.1 Research Topic: Informality and Precarity

Addressing the research problem outlined above requires clarifying the concepts informality and precarity. Informality in the labour context implies unregistered employment that stands outside a regulatory framework of labour and social law. As such it is distinguishable from standards of formal employment (cf. Mayer-Ahuja 2012). The concept thus also refers to provisional income strategies as well as forms of self-employed work and self-organisation in the so-called informal sector. Informality emerges, on the one hand, from everyday work practice that takes place in an extra-legally regulated framework and, on the other hand, from the legal regulation of enterprises and the labour market. The more encompassing concept of the informal economy includes both unregistered enterprises (in the informal sector) and unregulated, unregistered work arrangements. The continuous expansion of the informal economy in the context of globalisation cannot be viewed in isolation from transformation processes that have led to a profound informalisation of the state and the economic system (vgl. Kößler & Hauck 1999). Informality is no longer an exception but has turned into normality. In postcolonial societies that have experienced fragile forms of statehood, state intervention is often driven by efforts to get resource conflicts and excesses of informality under control. This, however, has severe consequences for local livelihood strategies, especially in informal trade and in border economies.

The social science debate on precaritisation and new forms of vulnerability in the Global North relates precarity to temporary, inadequately protected and low-paid employment (cf. Dörre 2013). The notion precariousness can be defined more broadly than precarity as precariousness encompasses different areas of life across contexts. Being precarious or in precarious conditions may involve experiences of instability and existential insecurity from different life and work contexts, which bear upon the entire life cycle. This state of being produces subjectivities and rationalities informing everyday modes of action while also affecting thoughts, attitudes, views, and emotions. An existential understanding of being precarious does not imply, however, that the local dimension of precarity and its material implications in their socio-spatial environment should be neglected. As two concepts being in tandem informality and precarity (Burchardt et al. 2013) usually refer to forms of employment and employment relations. Since they can be found in various facets of informal and precarious work, there is a need to contextualize them with everyday working and living conditions.

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the debate on the informal sector started with empirical observations in the Global South (Hart 1973). In the era of economic liberalisation and restructuring, this debate came to reflect new realities of economic production and labour organisation in the Global North (Portes et al. 1989). While in the central European context, the concept of precarity is closely linked to the dismantling of the welfare state since the 1980s (Castel & Dörre 2009) informalisation and precaritisation are being discussed from a global perspective ever since this transformation (Mahnkopf 2003; Mahnkopf & Altvater 2015). An academic controversy has arisen whether precaritisation and growing insecurity of employment in the Global North and Global South converged into a new age of precarity, which, starting in the 1970s/1980s, culminated in the global recession of 2008/2009. While some authors subscribe to this reading of precarity, other argue that precarious work was everyday reality in the Global South long before it became widespread in the Global North (Standing 2011; Munck 2013; Scully 2016; Mayer-Ahuja 2017). Following on from this, I argue that Tunisia, despite being part of a globalisation that creates growing precariousness (Altvater & Mahnkopf 2002) does not neatly fit into the narratives of this debate. While it is true that key turning points in Tunisia's political economy are quite comparable with other countries in the Global South, the trajectory of Tunisia as a Mediterranean country on the margins of the Global South nevertheless complicates epistemological and geographical boundaries. State-building after independence went along with the establishment of a welfare system modelled after the European one. This development can first and foremost be attributed to the influence of the Tunisian trade union federation UGTT. In the 1980s, when the economy was suffering from recession, stagnation, hyperinflation and a balance-of-payment crisis, international financial institutions imposed structural adjustment measures, which also affected the corporatist welfare regime. There was shrinking employment security and a push towards the flexibilization of wage labour. Following this crisis, the Tunisian state pursued a new strategy of poverty reduction aiming to extend social transfers to the unsecured (Ben Romdhane 2011). Although the outreach of the social security system was increased in the long run, social benefits and secure, stable employment remained the privilege of a few. An expanding informal sector and widespread precariousness of labour became a growing challenge for job seekers on the labour market. In the context of privatisation policies in the late 1980s and 1990s, Tunisian social policy turned to a market-oriented approach. Being in accordance with the principle of "help to self-help", employment policy now placed greater emphasis on economic initiative and the promotion of entrepreneurship (Catusse et al. 2009; Laroussi 2009).

Following the political uprising of 2011, informalisation and precaritisation have widely affected a growing number of people in Tunisia, including many youth and young adults. Informal and precarious work occurs in many facets and in different economic sectors, but is characterised by comparable conditions such as underpayment, lack of social security, insufficient protection against illness and accident risks, and no protection against dismissal.[[2]](#footnote-2) Companies often create temporary jobs to make employment relationships more flexible and sidestep dismissal regulations. Employment contracts are often made orally (vgl. World Bank 2014b: 18). Precarious working conditions are also found among the self-employed who pursue income strategies at their own risk − for example as micro-entrepreneurs in the so-called informal sector. The informal sector is particularly widespread in marginalised regions where unemployment is high and that lack economic alternatives, especially in the northwest, southwest and southeast of the country, but also in urban peripheries of large cities (Ben Zakour 2017).

In numerous studies and reports, international organisations such as the World Bank or the International Labour Office seek to estimate the size of the informal economy and informal employment as precisely as possible. It can be assumed that the informal economy in Tunisia accounts for more than one third of the gross domestic product, according to some estimates more than 40 per cent or even more than 50 per cent. While this may clarify the scope of this problem, I rather opt for a different approach: based on empirically founded analyses, I intend to break down concepts of informality and precarity to everyday working and living conditions in the urban context. Informal work, precarity and joblessness lie on a continuum of insecurity that enacts a dialectical tension between inclusion and exclusion. My approach requires a multi-level analysis that contextualizes and specifies these phenomena in their various forms. To this end, I first analyse how uneven development processes in their spatial and economic dimension are related to Tunisia's asymmetrical integration into regional and global economic interdependencies. While the historical analysis shows how rising unemployment and a growing informal sector came to weigh on Tunisian society ever since the economic crisis in the late 1980s, individual life situations from the transition period after 2011 display different facets of informal and precarious work as well as joblessness under the impact of economic recession (see chapter 5).

## 1.2 Research field : Cities and urban inequality

The geographical location makes Tunisia a unique crossroad at the frontier between the Global North and the Global South, Europe, Africa and the Arab world.[[3]](#footnote-3) At first glance, it seems somewhat odd to include Tunis, a Mediterranean metropolis of a country that is politically and economically entangled with Europe, in the academic debate on cities in the Global South (Parnell & Robinson 2012; Oldfield & Parnell 2014; Roy 2014). I shall nevertheless argue that certain urban dynamics in the North African Mediterranean metropolises reflect key issues that are also addressed in the debate on cities in the Global South. Since urban problems such as fragmentation, segregation and polarisation have become more pronounced, especially in the periphery of the Greater Tunis area, there is good reason to ask how this links up with the global discourse on the right to the city (Simone 2005a; Lefebvre 1967; Harvey 2003; Mayer 2009; Samara et al. 2013; Samara 2013) and its implications for large North African cities (Signoles 2014; Belguidoum et al. 2015).

Like in many countries of the Global South there is a historical background to these urban problems. Here the focus lies on the emergence of informal settlements in the urban periphery, which despite being the object of several restructuring, rehabilitation and development programmes, are still insufficiently integrated into the urban system. Their emergence can be traced back to rural-urban migration of impoverished groups in the 1960s. Originally stemming from interior regions, they sought access to lower circuits of the urban economy. Disintegration processes in the rural hinterland led to steadily increasing flows of internal migration to the cities. When the relatively small city-core of the Tunisian capital became overpopulated, many inhabitants of insanitary housing areas moved to the periphery, where the so-called *habitat spontané* grew into highly densified informal settlements (vgl. Chabbi 2012). As the formal urban labour market could not absorb the high number of job seekers, they had to look for work in the so-called unstructured sector, where workers faced precarious working conditions (vgl. Charmes 1978, 1982). The historical conditions of urban development in Tunisia point to a set of problems that arise at different stages of urbanisation and that can framed with the concept of 'urban informality' (Roy & AlSayyad 2004). In empirical terms this concept comprises both informal housing and informal economic activities.

Although informalisation and precaritisation have affected large parts of Tunisian wage labour society since the 1980s, everyday working and living conditions need to be seen against the backdrop of socio-spatial inequality in an urban context. In fact, Tunisia's unequal integration into regional and global economic interdependencies that were perpetuated by liberalisation policy led to two contrary planning dynamics in the field of urban policy (vgl. Zaki et al. 2011; Bacha & Legros 2015): on the one hand, new forms of urban development programmes such as restructuring and rehabilitation projects, which were intended to mitigate social crises in urban peripheries and enhance control over urban space; on the other hand, prestigious upgrading projects and market-driven investments in particularly exposed spaces, such as urban waterfront promenades, techno parks or business districts concentrated around the lakes of Tunis, which were financed by investors from the Persian Gulf. This booming urbanism of megaprojects had direct consequences, however, for the spatial structure of Tunis, which increasingly resembled a divided city, and for the urban system. The spatial expansion of the urban periphery led to a growing spatial gap between administrative and economic centres on the one hand and residential areas on the other (UNEP 2011: 17). These urban realities have had widespread repercussions on young people who live in urban peripheries while being restricted in their spatial mobility. The effects of socio-spatial seclusion pose great challenges for young people and their appropriation of the cityscape. Since economic disintegration often comes with experiencing the impact of spatial fragmentation and socio-spatial segregation,[[4]](#footnote-4) mobility and circular movements towards other districts or regions are often the only way to escape economic deprivation and find employment. The dilemma is discussed in more detail by looking at the urban district of Ettadhamen, located in the north-western periphery of Tunis, and how it is enmeshed in multidimensional forms of urban inequality. In its spatial and temporal contexts this research field displays political and social dynamics that are not always directly related to the research topic. Yet they clearly had an impact on my research practice and the research problem. These dynamics revolve around the relationship of marginalised Tunisian citizens to state institution, recurring trends of migration, mobilisation, and protest, as well as the role of the Salafist movement in the urban context.

## 1.3 Focus on youth and young people between participation and exclusion

Throughout the last decade, the issue of youth has been an important focus of development policy. Different UN organisations have published several reports that discuss the youth issue from different angles. For example, the youth category is being addressed in relation to the Millennium Development Goals, their implementation being measured by specific indicators (UNDP 2007), or in the context of the Arab Human Development Reports (UNDP 2009, 2016)*.* The starting point to addressing the youth issue is usually the demographic weight of the age group between 15 and 29 years. In the Arab world, this group accounts for about 30 per cent of the total population (UNDP 2016: 22). While the debate on the *youth bulge* has been prevalent in development discourse for quite a while, the peak of demographic growth leading to a disproportionately large youth population has recently been attained or even passed in most Arab, especially North African countries.[[5]](#footnote-5) Youth nevertheless remains a target group for development policy and the question of how development strategies and funding schemes can be tailored to young people’s needs is of vital concern. There is also growing awareness of how to involve youth in decision-making processes. In the Arab world, the protests of the Arab Spring showcased the exclusion and vulnerability of young people in different life areas. According to the authors of the Arab Human Development Report of 2016, a lack of both political and economic participation first and foremost drives youth exclusion (ibid.). Years after the Arab Spring, this situation has hardly changed, as the problem of youth unemployment clearly demonstrates. According to a study conducted by the International Labor Organization, the youth unemployment rate in the Arab states stood at 30.6 per cent in 2016 (ILO 2016b: 5). While the issue of youth is now being addressed from very different angles, the problem of youth unemployment remains a priority on the agenda of UN organisations, the International Labour Organization as well as ministries and institutions at the national level.

In Tunisia, the problem of youth unemployment is largely based on structural shortcomings of the labour market and the educational system. Since a large proportion of job seekers are unable to find employment in the public sector and in big companies, the only alternative is to look for jobs in MSME (micro, small, medium enterprises) and in the informal sector. This is the case for low-qualified job seekers and school dropouts, but increasingly also for university graduates.[[6]](#footnote-6) While the unemployment rate is disproportionately high among well-educated youth, there is also a non negligible number of young people who are neither in education (school, higher education, or vocational training), nor in employment (dependent or self-employment). The World Bank uses for this group of jobless and disengaged people the acronym NEET (*Not in Education, Employment or Training*) (World Bank 2014a: xiii). This indicator refers to the high proportion of inactive young people who must defer their entry into the labour market. Many of them have to manage without any income of their own. Their livelihood depends on family support or public transfer payments. In a study published in 2014 by the World Bank, the Center for Mediterranean Integration and the Tunisian Observatoire National de la Jeunesse, 33 per cent of young people in the age range between 15 and 29 were classified as NEET (ibid., 7). In Tunisia this indicator comprises many school dropouts and young women. In the years before the Arab Spring many young people left their region of origin in the rural hinterland to look for work in urban areas. This wave of internal migration can be explained by the fact that the NEET rate is significantly higher in the rural Tunisia.

According to a study by the International Labour Office, a high percentage among the active youth whose share of the total youth population is rather limited (31.2 per cent of young people aged 15-29) are in precarious or informal employment. In 2014, 86.1 per cent of Tunisia’s youth population worked informally, 46.9 per cent of them in the formal sector and 39.2 per cent in the so-called informal sector (ILO 2016a: 39). Informal employment among youth is more widespread in rural regions than in urban regions; according to the above cited World Bank study in 2014, it was 71.9 per cent and 55.4 per cent respectively. (World Bank 2014a: xvi).[[7]](#footnote-7) The World Bank highlights the importance of self-employment and entrepreneurial initiative for integrating youth into the labour market. In Tunisia, however, only a limited proportion of the active youth are self-employed (12.1 per cent in coastal areas and the south of the country, 8.1 per cent in the interior) (ibid.).

Given this situation, the question that follows is as to which strategies young people or young adults develop to escape the threat of unemployment and economic exclusion. How do they manage to obtain an income that can at least temporarily secure their livelihood, either as a main income occupation or as a supplement to other sources of income. Informal and precarious work is often the only way to gain access to the labour market, especially for young people who have dropped out of school at an early age. Unless they have already set up their own household, young people are usually part of the parental household. Their aspirations for autonomy may be based on both economic and social motives. This assumption derives from the premise, however, that age is a suitable framing for problems such as unemployment and economic exclusion. This premise is questionable for several reasons. One of the reasons is that the Tunisian *youth bulge* is now in decline.[[8]](#footnote-8) The common age ranges of 15 to 24 or even 15 to 29 years insufficiently capture the issue at hand and older age groups are often affected by similar problems. In the context of an ongoing economic crisis, unemployment and underemployment are framed as being unique to the category of youth. The paradigmatic focus on youth in development discourse and practices is further problematic as argues anthropologist Mayssoun Sukarieh (2017) because it serves as an analytical foil for dealing with larger development and security concerns. According to her argument, the self-evidence of the youth category turns out to be misleading if one wishes to critically reflect upon the life situations of adolescents and young adults from a Political Economy perspective.

While youth as an analytical category needs differentiation, the long-lasting impact of generational effects is hard to ignore. Karl Mannheim’s concept of generation (1928) refers to generational cohorts which have certain experiences in common and occupy proximate positions in social space without necessarily forming a generational consciousness. Building on this argument, the political scientist Emma Murphy (2012: 15) maintains that Arab youth is not primarily constituted by biological age but by experiences shared by a broader age group - such as the knock-on effects of failed state policies or the exclusion from elite privileges. If, however, exclusion becomes salient to a point where young people are denied taking part in both economic life and political decision-making, then, I would argue, they are compelled to develop their own strategies for gaining agency beyond the state and its institutions. While youth-oriented policies of Arab states have often proven to be ineffective, youth create their own spaces of autonomy and engage in new forms of participation through informal networks. That being said, my understanding of participation as an avenue towards emancipation focuses on individual life situations. Being a conceptual counterpart to dynamic processes of exclusion that extend from the individual to the collective experience of a larger group, the notion of participation used here circumscribes agency primarily at the individual level.

## 1.4 Tunisia amid political transformation and economic crisis

For a long time, Tunisia was known to many Germans only from travel brochures as a relatively cheap holiday destination with tempting beaches. In 2011 it suddenly came into the public eye. All at once there was greatly increased interest among politicians, international organisations, media, think tanks and academics in political and social changes that were unexpectedly occurring in the comparatively small North African country. A chain of events unfolded that, according to prevailing narratives, began with the self-immolation of vegetable trader Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010. It eventually culminated in the resignation of President Ben Ali, who left the country on 14 January 2011. Shortly before, a prolonged state of emergency had been declared throughout the country. After being denied asylum in France, Ben Ali was finally accepted in Saudi Arabia.

Much disputed is the question as to the driving forces behind the waves of protest that led to this turning point. Some analyses started from the premise that the protests setting in the interior of the country in December 2010 initially focused on socio-economic demands for dignified living conditions and not so much on political goals. (cf. ICG 2012; Zemni 2013). Social inequalities and corruption were most blatantly demonstrated by the wealth of the family of President Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi. Not only did they enjoy a luxurious lifestyle*,* but they also wielded concentrated economic power, maintaining close ties with the country's most important companies and pocketing millions in untaxed profits. It was therefore not surprising to see a broad alliance against the dictatorship regime, consisting of the president, his entourage and the single party rule of the RCD (*Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique*). The protests of the unemployed and precarious from the lower and middle classes, which spread like wildfire, received support by rank and file trade union activists of the UGTT (*Union générale tunisienne du travail*) at an early stage. Other observers saw the Tunisian uprising primarily as a liberal protest movement for democracy that emerged from an educated middle class and its desire for political and civil rights (cf. Goldstein 2011) .

The question in how far divergent narratives about the "Tunisian revolution" are compatible has been debated extensively immediately after the Ben Ali regime had come to an end and I shall not reiterate the debate here (cf. Ayeb 2011; Gherib 2012; Honwana 2013). What is largely undisputed however is that Tunisia continued to struggle with major economic problems after 2011. Unemployment figures skyrocketed from 2010 to 2011 (from 13.1 to 18.3 per cent) and remained steadily above 15 per cent (persons of working age over 15 years) until 2016 (ILO 2017: 15). The inflation rate also increased, and the Tunisian state faced growing external debt whereas foreign direct investment remained very limited.[[9]](#footnote-9) When the European market underwent a deep recession in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008, the long-term consequences also affected Tunisia, which has maintained close economic ties with Europe, especially France. The gloomy picture of the economic crisis contrasts with Tunisia’s successful transition to democracy compared to other countries of the so-called Arab Spring. Tunisia has been relatively successful in managing the democratic transformation process. In 2018, Tunisia could look back to several political achievements, such as the adoption of a new, progressive constitution, free presidential and parliamentary elections (in 2014) and municipal elections (in 2018).

However, this successful transformation process was not yet foreseeable immediately after the uprising in 2011. The period up to 2014 was marked by political instability and tense situations that could have easily escalated into violence. While the parliament held controversial debates over the drafting of the new constitution, fierce tensions, and clashing interests between opposed political forces had reverberations across society. In addition, the political situation greatly deteriorated following the assassination of political leaders of the opposition movement *Front Populaire.* In this contextthere were also emerging tendencies of radicalization among parts of the Salafist movement, which gained considerable influence after 2011, especially in urban regions. The Tunisian state reacted to the growing threat from jihadist Salafism with arrests, surveillance measures and the dissolution of associations that were said to have links to terrorist groups (Watanabe & Merz 2017: 140). In the Tunisian border regions the security situation greatly destabilised in mid-2013 in the aftermath of jihadist attacks (vgl. ICG 2013).

Social tensions and security problems also affected the government. The post of prime minister was changed three times until Mehdi Jomaa was commissioned to form a technocratic government in January 2014, replacing the three-party Troika coalition. The Troika coalition had come to power in October 2011 following general elections for the Legislative Assembly. It consisted of the conservative Islamic *Ennahda*, the conservative liberal *Congrès pour la République* and the social democratic Ettakatol. This government coincided with the presidency of Moncef al-Marzouki, who was elected as the new president by the legislative assembly in December 2011. From the beginning, the troika had faced intensified macroeconomic problems, while mobilisations, for example strikes, sit-ins and petitions, prevailed in many places of the country. As a government with a neoliberal economic orientation, the Troika did not offer viable solutions to the country's social problems. Facing pressure from the international financial institutions, it was anyway obliged to pursue austerity measures. This situation did not change much under subsequent governments and there were renewed surges in protests and mobilisations, especially in marginalised regions of the country. The various forms of protest (hunger strikes, sit-ins, road blockades, marches) point to a perpetuation of fault lines that were considered root causes of the uprising gaining momentum in 2010. One of these fault lines stems from regional socio-economic disparities between the more developed coastal regions and the neglected interior of the country; these come with territorial disparities in local areas. The other fault line results from a profound cleavage between younger and older generations that permeates the entire society. Despite persisting divisions within society, the first years after the uprising were also a time when new spaces opened up for civil society organisations and economic grassroots initiatives.

Underneath the chain of successive events lies a more momentous, far-reaching transformation. That is the disintegration of a political-economic system that had initially been a guarantor of stability and economic subsistence for many Tunisians but fell deeper and deeper into crisis throughout the 2000s. The political uprising, which the political scientist Beatrice Hibou (2011) referred to as a "revolutionary moment", contributed to the dissolution of a political order that was no longer sustainable. This lead to a discussion on the principles of a new social contract, which was to replace the authoritarian social contract propagated by the Ben Ali regime (Hamann 2011; ILO 2011; UNDP 2011). Despite a temporary power vacuum resulting from the weakening of the state's monopoly on the use of force, both state apparatus and bureaucracy initially remained unchanged. The neoliberal paradigm of economic and development policies that had prevailed before 2011 was also maintained. Some economic experts consider this a reason for the persistence of the country's economic problems (cf. Achcar et al. 2017) .

Alongside the challenges of political transition and economic crisis, a profound change in the media landscape also set in after state restrictions and control mechanisms had been removed. Journalists no longer faced the pressure to follow a line set by the regime. However, ideological tensions and conflicts between different patronage networks, which played out strongly in politics during this period, had considerable repercussions on media reporting. Even after 2011 one can hardly speak of an independent press (cf. El-Issawi 2012). A multitude of media outlets and online portals came into being, but their existence was not always long-lasting. At the same time, the production of knowledge about Tunisia by foreign experts, research institutions and think tanks experienced a tremendous boom after 2011, while many Tunisian scholars first held back with publishing analyses of the uprising situation. This knowledge production addressed the causes of the protests (Honwana 2011; Sadiqi 2011) socio-economic challenges (BAD 2012; ICG 2012) and aspects of the institutional transformation process (Collins 2011; Paciello 2011) i.e. participation in political decision-making , elections and political parties. Given the deterioration of the security situation in Tunisia and in the region as a whole, the focus shifted to security issues and migration (ICG 2013; Fahmi & Meddeb 2015; Watanabe & Merz 2017).

The dynamics after the uprising in Tunisia sketched out here show the ambivalence of a contemporary historical process whose outcome was mostly uncertain at the time. This uncertainty had an impact on the entire research landscape on the North African region. Myriad publications followed the events that were unfolding before the eyes of the observers. Other topics that were not directly related to causes and consequences of the uprising or the political transformation process gained much less attention for the time being. The profound societal implications of the uprising led to a critique of established research agendas and common paradigms, for example in the fields of urban research, research on protest and social movements, and in youth studies. One result of this change in knowledge production is that a variety of representations now overshadow the discourse regarding Tunisia. Tunisia is used as an example to discuss overarching questions whose implications reach far beyond the country's borders, such as the relationship between modernity and tradition, stability and crisis, authoritarian rule and democracy, economic mainstream and social alternatives, border surveillance and freedom of movement. Seen against this backdrop, one’s own research inevitably reproduces a vision of reality that cannot be read in isolation from other representations of Tunisia after the uprising. The thematic area of investigation is at once discursively predetermined and politically charged. Considering the impact of political and social turmoil in the country and in the entire Mediterranean region, this is hardly surprising.

## 1.5 Research question, structure and methods

After having outlined the contours of the research problem, I will now formulate the research question. In the individual chapters I will engage with this research question from different angles and in complementary perspective. At its core the research question focuses on the acting subjects in their everyday living and working conditions. This focus firstly requires a spatial contextualisation that specifies contexts of urban inequality for different urban settings while discussing the impact of regional disparities and socio-spatial fragmentation at the national level. Secondly, it needs a temporal contextualisation that looks at historical and contemporary conditions shaping individual lives. Finally, the socio-political contextualisation asks as to the larger political and societal implications of the issues at hand.

Research question

* What income strategies do youths and young adults develop to cope with everyday conditions of economic insecurity that are shaped by structural unemployment as well as informality and precariousness? To what extent do they manage to generate alternative socio-institutional resources, for example by relying on informal networks, which? Does this allow them to overcome structural constraints that produce unemployment and economic exclusion? And finally: can self-employment and provisional income generating activities be considered a realistic alternative to dependent wage labour?
* How are the life situations of adolescents and young adults positioned in a continuum of insecurity, both at the local micro level (case studies) and at the national macro level (quantitative analysis)? What prospects are likely to emerge from current life situations and ongoing transition phases? To what extent is the age range or "generation" in question particularly vulnerable to multidimensional processes of exclusion, especially the consequences of precaritisation and unemployment?

Spatial contextualisation

The spatial contextualisation refers to uneven development, which is discussed in regard to regional disparities as well as socio-spatial fragmentation and segregation in the urban periphery. This illustrates how uneven development impacts everyday conditions in the urban spaces investigated here. It will be discussed to what extent disparities and spatial inequalities came along with growing unemployment, contributing to the spread of the informal sector and informal economy activities.[[10]](#footnote-10) The contextualisation further extends to different forms of spatial mobility, for example internal migration, transnational migration, and labour mobility. In how far find young people ways to gain mobility and get access to other spaces?

Temporal contextualisation

Empirical case studies and the analysis of quantitative data are set in the temporal context of Tunisia's transition after the uprising of 2011 (between the years 2012-2016). The temporal contextualisation further extends to historical processes since the 1970s such as urbanisation, internal migration from rural areas to the city and urban development in the periphery of the Greater Tunis area. The longstanding consequences of the flexibilisation and precaritisation of employment, which grew out of structural adjustment measures since the late 1980s, are also being discussed.

Socio-political contextualisation

From a socio-political perspective the analysis sheds light on the societal implications of structural exclusion in the politically unstable period after the uprising. Socio-political implications are related to root causes of the uprising in Tunisia, especially the crisis of the so-called authoritarian social contract, as well as mobilisations and protest ahead of the Arab Spring and in the years following the fall of the regime. In how far has this period seen aspirations for solidarity and autonomy among young people despite widespread precaritisation? Do young people bring demands to the fore that claim for to economic, social, and political participation in a broader sense?

The research question and its contextualisation are implemented in the structure of the book as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a state of the art by discussing theoretical debates that have informed interdisciplinary urban research, development research and the sociology of labour. The debates refer to implications of urban inequality in the Global North and the Global South. These have gained prominence due to a profound transformation of cities since the turn of the millennium. Engaging with urban studies, I draw on concepts for conceptualising practices of space production introduced by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre such as socially produced space, the right to the city and everyday life. The micro-perspective allows for an attention to different dynamics in urban spaces: asymmetrical consequences of central state interventions, economic liberalisation, and privatisation on the one hand, livelihood strategies, spatial mobilities and access to local resources on the other hand. In this context, concepts of the informal sector, informalisation and urban informality as well as precarity and precaritisation are discussed in more detail. It will then be considered how they can open analytical perspectives for investigating everyday living and working conditions in urban spaces in the North African context, in this case Tunisia.

Chapter 3 analyses uneven development processes in their spatial and economic dimensions. The focus lies on disparities between different regions that have emerged in the course of continuous urbanisation dynamics. Internal and transnational migration as well as the expansion the informal sector and the parallel economy, informal cross-border trade in particular, underline the longstanding effects of marginalisation after decades of systematic neglect of interior regions. Socio-spatial inequality is also discussed by looking at the Greater Tunis area where it is reflected in fragmentation, segregation, and polarisation. Certain trends of urban development which become increasingly visible within the urban periphery (urban megaprojects and informal settlements) as well as in the centre of Tunis (markets and street economies) are discussed as cases in point.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 represent the actual empirically based focus of analysis. To this end, chapter 4 starts with an introduction of the research field by looking at the peripheral district of Ettadhamen.[[11]](#footnote-11) The history of this urban space as described here encompasses its emergence and spatial expansion through the spreading of informal settlements as well as the significance of a local economy and the role of informal networks. The introduction of the research field further extends to social dynamics such as transnational migration and the causes of mobilisation and protests. These insights into the research field provide a starting point for discussing sociological and ethnographic methods that informed the access to the field and my method of analysis.

Chapter 5 analyses individual life situations in a setting where unemployment, informal and precarious work are widespread. The case studies are divided into different categories: joblessness, work as a casual labourer, wage labour, working in the family business, and self-employment. These categorisations are meant to delineate different employment situations. Behind such categories, however, lies the overarching problem of uncertain transitions from attending school to starting working life proper, from living with the family of origin to gaining household independence. This problem implies asking for the extent to which the uncertainty surrounding coping strategies in the present allows for a cushion against insecurity. The chapter draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews that I conducted during research visits in 2012 and 2013, focusing on the Ettadhamen district in the north-western periphery of the Greater Tunis area.

Finally, chapter 6 shows the living conditions and prospects of Tunisian young people under the impact of precariousness and uncertainty. The chapter first sets out structural trends that can be identified in the life situations of young people between the ages of 16 and 30, especially with regards to their economic situation. It will then be asked to what extent the precariousness of their life situations either leads to the blocking and delaying of transition phases or to their de-structuring. Relevant debates in critical youth research are positioned and discussed in this context. The discussion further extends to questions as to what prospects young people anticipate in the face of precariousness and uncertainty and whether they are a generation that is particularly affected by different forms of exclusion. For this purpose, I draw on quantitative data from a study conducted under the auspices of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which comprises a nationwide sample of 1,000 young people in the age range between 16 and 30 years (Gertel & Hexel 2017). The category of youth will thus be problematised based on qualitative research, which I compare with more comprehensive quantitative findings.

This approach thus requires the combination of different methodological approaches. The qualitative research consists of semi-structured interviews with 40 adolescents and young adults, which were conducted in the periods May to July 2012 and September 2013 to January 2014. In addition, I immersed myself in participant observation, while holding informal discussions and conducting interviews with informants, experts, and representatives of civil society organisations. The concrete conditions of my research practice and my strategies for gaining access to the field as well as methods for evaluating the qualitative data are discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.4. I also drew on media coverage, including Tunisian French-language daily newspapers such as La Presse and Le Temps, as well as Tunisian and international online news portals. This allowed me to reconstruct the temporal context and provide up-to-date information.

The quantitative data in the form of a population-based nationwide dataset was collected in May 2016 by a multidisciplinary team of BJKA Consulting Tunisie, an institution specialised in market research, marketing studies and surveys. Since I participated in the pre-test of the questionnaire in Tunis in March 2016 and attended several meetings with the scientific advisory board in Berlin (May 2015, July 2015, April 2016), I had the chance to follow up on the conception of a questionnaire for the entire MENA-based survey and its numerous revisions. Hence, I was able to get familiar with the content and methodological aspects of this study from the very beginning. In terms of methodology, I therefore follow an integrative approach that aims to use different methods across the board to shed light on the research problem in a multidimensional way. The insights gained from this multidimensional analysis provide a basis for uncovering causes of exclusion in the urban context.

1. The qualitative fieldwork took place from May to June 2012 and September 2013 to January 2014. I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with about 40 adolescents and young adults. The quantitative data was collected as part of a representative study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which was published in 2017 under the title "Between Confidence and Uncertainty“. This data is analysed in chapter 6 in order to situate the case studies in a larger context. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term social security used here refers primarily to health, pension and social security entitlements, which in Tunisia, however, are granted almost exclusively to permanent employees in the formal sector. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The terms Global North and Global South are to be understood as geographical constructs that, though reflecting actual political and economic power relations of global dimension, cannot be sharply distinguished from one another. Here they are addressed from the angle of urban inequality, informality, and precarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My understanding of segregation is twofold. One, that segregation is a representation of spatially consolidated social inequality, and two, that it implies the spatial separation of different functional centres within an urban area or agglomeration. On the multidimensionality of socio-spatial segregation, see the article by Monika Alisch (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The age range of 15 to 29 years defined by the Middle East Youth Initiative is broader than the conventional UN definition (15 to 24 years). This may be due to the fact that the transition phases of young people towards adulthood are further delayed. United Nations Development Progamme (UNDP) (2016: 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While it is true that civil service jobs were increased after the 2011 uprising, most university graduates waited in vain to be hired. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this study, the lack of an employment contract is mentioned as a decisive criterion for informal employment. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to the ILO study cited above, the proportion of young people between 15 and 24 in the total Tunisian population declined from 20.7 per cent in 2005 to 15.5 per cent in 2015 International Labour Organization (ILO) (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. An online publication by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation shows that in 2017 one fifth of Tunisia's total budget had to be spent on debt repayment. These funds could not be used for the implementation of development projects and investments in the country's infrastructure. Ben Gadha and Schäfer (2017: 4). According to the authors, Tunisia’s external debt mainly results from a persistent foreign trade deficit, ongoing external debt repayment costs and a decline of foreign direct investment. In 2015, remittances from Tunisians abroad proved to be a far more important source of foreign exchange than foreign direct investment, which was comparatively low at TND 1.5 billion (approx. EUR 800 million) (ibid., 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The demarcation between different terms is discussed in chapter 3.4 and illustrated by looking at problems of uneven development in Tunisia. The informal sector goes back to analyses that dealt with self-employment and unregistered, small-scale economic units. The term informal economy (also known as parallel economy) describes economic activities and work arrangements that often eschew statistical enumeration but exist in different sectors of the economy. The scope of this phenomenon is usually measured by macroeconomic methods. The parallel market (*marché parallèle*) which is discussed here in connection with informal trade is closely tied to the informal economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *At-taḍāmun* is the Arabic word for solidarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)