



MANOUBA, TUNISIA

**VULNERABILITIES TO CORRUPTION
ASSESSMENT REPORT**

JULY 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan democracy-development organization headquartered in Washington, DC. IRI works with civil society and governmental partners throughout the world to strengthen democratic practices and empower democratic leaders. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy, IRI has created a Vulnerabilities to Corruption Approach (VCA) to assist local governments in identifying risks to corrupt practices as a first step for continued IRI assistance for transparency and accountability initiatives.¹

Corruption is a top concern for citizens in Tunisia, as measured by IRI's recent [poll](#). The national government has made strong public commitments to addressing the issue. Most notably, the national government instituted the *Instance Nationale de Lutte Contre la Corruption* or INLUCC, the national entity for fighting corruption, and has been progressively making strides to be in full compliance with the United Nations Convention against Corruption. On May 8, 2017 INLUCC and IRI signed a Memorandum of Understanding to implement the VCA in the municipality of Manouba as an effort to turn the city into an "island of integrity." Manouba had demanded assistance to INLUCC and was deemed as an appropriate partner IRI given its track record promoting open government initiatives and the commitment by the acting mayor to advance an anti-corruption agenda.

The municipality of Manouba is the capital of the Manouba Governorate. The city is located directly west of Tunisia's capital, Tunis, and has a population of approximately 60,000. Manouba is also home to one of the country's largest higher learning institutions, Manouba University, which hosts approximately 25,000 students. Its economy is largely based on light and mechanical industries.

II. METHODOLOGY

This assessment represents the results of a five-day site visit to Manouba, Tunisia, in July 2017. The assessment was conducted by a team of four members, coming from IRI's Middle East and North Africa and Governance division staff, and based both in DC and in Tunis. The assessment comprised four key informant interviews and five focus groups, semi-structured interviews with the representatives of local civil society organizations (CSO), city employees, national and subnational officials and businesses. In total, 23 people were interviewed, including seven (7) women. The interview protocol used for this assessment is based on a similar methodology successfully utilized by IRI in Mongolia, Indonesia, Ukraine and Cambodia.

The scope of this assessment was determined by the VCA steering committee and IRI. Prior to carrying out the assessment mission IRI conducted a political economy analysis of the city of Manouba so to identify windows of opportunity and potential bottlenecks for reform. Subsequently, IRI convened the first steering committee meeting on July 4, 2017. On this occasion, the INLUCC and Manouba representatives agreed on the focus area for the assessment. As a result, the original intent of the assessment was to analyze vulnerabilities to corruption within the city government "legalization" (notarization) of official documents process. Most interviewees identified additional corruption-related challenges and thus these are reflected in this assessment report.

¹ The VCA is a methodology that IRI created that bolsters anti-corruption efforts by partnering with local stakeholders through a steering committee comprised of representatives of both government and civil society. The VCA identifies corruption-related risks and gaps in government processes and supports government responses to these issues. It comprises four steps: explore, assess, enact and showcase. This report represents the outcome of the assessment step.

The report is structured around two primary findings: the low quality of municipal services and the limited efforts to engage citizens in local governance. The Institutes' recommendations ought to work in tandem with other organizations' efforts to improve service delivery.

III. PROGRAMMATIC CONTEXT

IRI conducted the VCA during a political decentralization process and prior to historic local government elections scheduled for December 2017.¹ These local elections represent the country's next step towards adopting elected and representative governance at all levels. Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisians will now be able to democratically elect municipal and regional councils that, under the current decentralization process, will be mandated to address economic growth and public service delivery issues.

Tunisians have high expectations for their government following the revolution and national elections. IRI polling data shows that Tunisians are in support of tackling corruption and that Tunisians perceive the need for democracy to meet expectations and produce tangible improvements in their living conditions. Since 2011, IRI has had stable presence in Tunisia and has been supporting political party leadership and campaigning candidates through every election. Currently, IRI's programming in Tunisia focuses on training political parties, strengthening civil society, conducting public opinion research and providing technical advice to the national government. By supporting decisive action against corruption, IRI is complementing its existing work in support of democratic consolidation in Tunisia. IRI programming has been responsive to the priorities expressed by Tunisian citizens and democratically elected authorities.

III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poor delivery of administrative services creates opportunities for corruption

Problem Statement

There are structural factors that create opportunities for corruption in Manouba. The notarization of documents and the issuing of construction authorizations, administrative functions under the responsibility of the local government, are particularly vulnerable to irregularities and graft. As a board member of Manouba's Organization for Consumer Defense reported, "construction authorizations are where the bribes and corruption happen." Yet, there are structural factors that make these processes vulnerable that affect all municipalities in Tunisia, including low tax collection and limited local sources of revenue, which create incentives to bureaucratize these practices. A rigid bureaucratic framework, in turn, reduces the capacity for municipalities to be flexible and adjust as needed to address these challenges.

¹ Local government elections were then postponed until May 2018.

Key Strengths

1. **Municipal officials have made efforts to provide better customer service.** Among other initiatives, the municipal offices remain open to the public seven days a week. The city has established an afternoon shift during the summer months to accommodate the increasing demand for administrative services. In addition, municipal officials have experimented with a mobile administrative unit, often located in local markets, to alleviate crowding at the municipal offices. According to some interviewees, Manouba stands out as a leader in the greater Tunis area in terms of pioneering innovative solutions for better service delivery. The President of the Manouba Special Delegation has publicly committed to improve transparency and accountability.

Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Poor quality in the delivery of key administrative services.** Unanimously, the stakeholders interviewed by IRI complained about the quality of the administrative services provided by the municipality, specifically regarding the notarization of documents and the authorization of construction permits. There are multiple reasons for this. First, the current facilities are insufficient to physically accommodate the number of citizens requesting services, resulting in overcrowding and exasperation. Second, the transaction software reportedly operates intermittently, resulting in much frustration of both municipal workers and customers. Finally, measures to improve tax collection are resulting in unintended consequences and creating opportunities for corruption. One of these measures requires citizens to meet their fiscal obligations (i.e. pay owed taxes) in order to receive administrative services from the city government. Although well intentioned, this requirement is incentivizing citizens to make arrangements with individual civil servants outside the law. Often, people would pay smaller amounts to a civil servant as a bribe and he or she record the owed taxes as paid.
2. **Lack of reliable, available guidelines on fees and processes for administrative services.** As mentioned, Tunisian cities are responsible for providing two main administrative services to their citizens: the legalization of documents of public interests and the issuing of construction permits. Although the existing legal framework establishes limits regarding the processing times and the fees for these transactions, citizens complain about the absence of clear instructions and deadlines for obtaining approval or denial on requests. Furthermore, both citizens and civil servants admit that receipts are not always provided, creating opportunities for bribery and corruption later. Specifically related to the construction permits, deficient oversight promoted illegal practices such as the purchase of lots that do not have the required authorizations for residential construction. As a result, buyers need to engage in several administrative procedures to obtain the required authorizations, ultimately creating opportunities for corruption as bribes are often needed along the way.
3. **Limited technical expertise among municipal workers.** Civil servants admitted that they lack the necessary skills to perform certain job functions, including the ability to verify the authenticity of copies of official documents such as university diplomas issued by other public entities. Citizens have perceived an overreach on the part of civil servants who request additional, non-essential, and non-relevant information regarding contracts or construction permits. Not only does this translate in more opportunities for workers to exact money from users but it also creates additional incentives for citizens to bypass the system and resort to fixers or under the table payments.

The President of the Manouba Special Delegation also complained that the municipality lacks technical experts such as civil engineers, urban planners and environmental, to effectively address city's needs.

Recommendations

- 1. Increase transparency on administrative fees and processes.** Although the assessment team verified that some information regarding fees and process is available in the municipal offices, there is still room for improvement. There are ways to disseminate information more widely and effectively. For example, the municipal staff could publish relevant information online and specifically on the municipal Facebook page, hanging posters in the wait rooms, hanging leaflets, and pinning announcement on the cork boards of various municipal buildings. The disseminated information ought to communicate with the public administrative fees and the requirements, expected wait times, and terms of notice for requested services. Furthermore, the city and INLUCC could consider a partnership with a telecommunication service provider to implement a free SMS service to deliver relevant information to Manouba residents.
- 2. Utilize technology to assist in service delivery.** Currently, control teams are in charge to check for construction authorizations. However, this mechanism has been described by some interviewees as 'anarchic.' Record keeping is vulnerable in every municipal division, for example, systems for tracking the notarization of document is inconsistent. A potential solution to record keeping and tracking is to utilize available technology. Control teams, for instance, could use smartphones or tablets to geotag their inspections and take pictures of the sites to complement and document findings. The municipality can use open source, free, and/or low-cost software as an option to improve their service delivery. In addition, the municipality could consider using web platform to develop an online system for scheduling appointments. Because the adoption of information communication technologies (ICT) can be costly, the municipality might want to consider organizing an *ideathon* involving local youth and the Manouba Techno-park. The focus of such event should be to find cost-effective solutions to the adoption of ICT.
- 3. Provide greater guidance and incentives for municipal workers.** Both civil servants and citizens agree that training opportunities for government staff are needed. There is a need for training on relevant norms and procedures of administrative services, principles of customer service and public service standards. In addition, municipal workers can enhance their skills participating to relevant workshops and referencing materials such as procedure manuals. To promote good practices, the city should incentives civil servants to keep improving their performance. Examples of incentives can be public recognition of public agencies, offices, and even individual public on their performance, as judged by citizens. Relatedly, this could incentivize honesty and integrity.

Insufficient efforts to engage citizens hampers government accountability

Problem Statement

Citizens have the duty and the right to hold their governments and public officials accountable and liable for their actions, decisions, and policies. However, citizens of Manouba currently don't have the necessary avenues to hold their government to account, ensuring that its practices and spending are honest and transparent, and that it effectively delivers the necessary services. Not only do the citizens lack ways to actively participate and engage with the municipal government but they also lack the necessary information to formulate proper judgements and feedback on the municipal administration performance. Ultimately, public officials could do more to equip citizens with appropriate resources and avenues of engagement.

Findings: Key Strengths

1. **Manouba municipal council has taken steps towards increased government openness.** The municipality has been hosting monthly public hearings and implementing citizen hours in the municipal building once a week. Several interviewees reported that city officials are “open to hear people’s concerns”. In addition, budgeting processes and the budget have been made public. Additionally, all levels of governance recognized that there is the need to address corruption by increasing citizens’ engagement. For example, there are ongoing campaigns to encourage people to vote in the in the upcoming local elections and INLUCC has increased its activism.

Findings: Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Deficient reciprocal communication efforts between citizens and municipality.** Despite recent attempts to improve citizen-government interactions, these two do not communicate openly and regularly with one another. To aggravate this, the municipality is yet to establish systematic publication of financial information. In words of the President of the Manouba Special Delegation, “there’s a lack of trust [among citizens] due to lack of transparency [in the municipality].” This sentiment was echoed by several interviewees, who emphasized that the public and particularly the youth are apathetic about getting involved in public affairs.
2. **Limited understanding among citizens regarding the roles and responsibilities of the municipality.** Citizens’ perception of the role of the municipality is narrow in scope: to provide and verify birth and death certificates, approve construction plans and validate contracts. Citizens are unaware that they have the right and responsibility to actively participate in governance. In addition, citizens are not granted access to financial information and budgeting initiatives—often citizens are not aware of how to find information or participate. As a result, citizens cannot influence overall budgetary decisions.
3. **Low confidence in the potential of political decentralization to fight corruption.** According to most interviewees, municipal elections are not likely and are not anticipated by citizens to improve governance and address corruption. Unless newly-elected officials or the national government mandates clear guidelines for municipal service, the city remains vulnerable to corruption.

Recommendations

- 1. Enhance existing participatory governance mechanisms and promote additional avenues for communication.** The current public hearings and citizen hours are a great way of creating the conditions for better communication between constituents and their representatives. However, it seems that they are not being successful at encouraging people to participate. Greater citizen outreach and communication regarding existing mechanisms is needed, with targeted outreach to youth and women. The municipality should consider leveraging Manouba's solid network of community-based organizations as partners to spread information about government services, processes, and opportunities for feedback.
- 2. Conduct awareness raising campaigns.** To improve citizens' understanding of the municipality's roles and responsibilities, city officials should proactively reach out to citizens through awareness raising campaigns. These campaigns could take several formats and could involve both traditional and digital media. The municipality could create and promote a website and social media presence to inform the community about opportunities for engagement more systematically and efficiently. As digital presence expands, the use of metrics and indicators can help the municipality to estimate impact against desired goals. Moreover, the municipality should consider create and maintain partnerships with local CSOs as they could be a valuable ally in securing public trust and participation.
- 3. Continue to promote participation in the upcoming local elections.** Municipal elections are an opportunity to elect a mayor that could hold accountable and/or remove corrupt officials. However, the ability of a mayor to do so requires a great deal of political capital, as entrenched interests are hard to overcome. Only a strong mandate could provide the new mayor with the legitimacy required to fight corruption. Such a strong mandate can only be guaranteed if there is a high electoral turnout. The city and the INLUCC should partner to foster and promote participation in the local elections as a way for citizens to have control on the fight on corruption. This could be done through a joint campaign or 'get out the vote' (GOTV) initiatives. Special consideration should be given to encouraging women and youth to vote and run for office.