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The accompaniment in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem

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Abstract

The development of countries is dependent on certain political conditions, but also and above all socio-economic ones. At this level, entrepreneurship, through its different forms, plays a key role. In this sense, in Tunisia, the public authorities have opted to encourage private initiative and have been engaged since the mid-1980s in a program aimed at creating a favorable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Indeed, entrepreneurship can only be stimulated by meeting the needs of entrepreneurs at different levels of the entrepreneurial process. It is in this context that this contribution is made, the objective of which is to explore, through qualitative exploratory research, the accompaniment of entrepreneurs in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem. The results of our study reveal that, although the actors of the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem play an undeniable role in promoting and supporting entrepreneurial initiatives, several elements suggest that the ecosystem as a whole has not yet managed to generate a fully coherent and efficient dynamic. Indeed, there is an urgent need to improve the interconnection between the different actors of the ecosystem, in order to create a real value chain for entrepreneurial initiatives.

JEL: L26, M13, Q57.

Keywords: accompaniment, entrepreneurship, ecosystem, Tunisian context.

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INTRODUCTION

In an uncertain global context increasingly characterized by continuous upheavals and unpredictable and rapid transformations, the entrepreneurial phenomenon continues to acquire socioeconomic merits (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023a; El Yamani et al., 2023; Tremblay et al., 2022). Self-employment and business creation have always been considered as solutions to many socioeconomic problems, particularly unemployment. Thus, business creation, considered to be the heart of the field of entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2020; Boussetta, 2011; Bruyat, 1993), has attracted significant interest for several decades, the reasons for which lie in the job creation it induces (Verstraete & Saporta, 2006). Indeed, newly created companies, and more broadly entrepreneurial activity, have been and still are important elements of the future of advanced societies through their contribution to the renewal and growth of countries (Gomes et al., 2023; Ragmoun, 2023; Urbano et al., 2020).

Even if, previously, interest in the phenomenon of business creation was uncertain, today, following the various positive impacts recorded (job creation, wealth creation, etc.), interest seems to be acquired and entrepreneurship, as an economic catalyst and field of scientific research, continues to gain ground (Abdennadher, 2012). Entrepreneurship now occupies an increasingly prominent place in national economies, giving significant weight to the entrepreneur and business creation (Abdennadher, 2021).

Today, we are seeking to promote entrepreneurship and encourage business creation by establishing a suitable legislative framework, favorable financial means and supporting this career choice on the part of individuals (Guerrero et al., 2021; Fofana et al., 2020). Several business creation accompaniment programs are intensifying in most countries around the world, making the entrepreneurial act a major political, social and economic issue. The entrepreneur has regained the deserved status of a central actor, but he is neither an omnipotent nor omniscient actor; he remains a component, among others, of the environment whose complexity is its main characteristic (Abdennadher et al., 2015). In order to find answers to questions concerning the relationship between the environment and organizations, some research work has been undertaken in this context in order to clarify this relationship and contribute to the resolution of certain problems that organizations may face. Many of these research studies have already highlighted the impact of environmental changes on societies, businesses and individuals (Bekour et al., 2022; Ghauri et al., 2021).

Indeed, business creation is an act that arises within a dynamic context and above all full of actors of different types. It is in this vein that this contribution is included, which aims to explore the accompaniment of entrepreneurs in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem. The latter remains little studied, especially during this critical period of socio-economic transition (Huang et al., 2023) and in a general environment strongly impacted by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis (Abdennadher, 2021). Thus, the aim is to answer the question of how is accompaniment presented in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem?

Indeed, we seek to explore accompaniment in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem in order to understand its role in supporting entrepreneurial activities. After a theoretical part presenting accompaniment in the field of entrepreneurship and examining the writings on the entrepreneurial ecosystem, we will present the methodological framework of the research to, finally, present and discuss the results we have reached.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurial accompaniment

Today, many countries continue to make the necessary efforts to establish, or optimally, improve a general framework for accompaniment entrepreneurship, mainly through the creation of structures to accompaniment project leaders and host start-up companies (Cheikh Abdou Lahad, 2023; Pouka Pouka & Ondoua Biwolé, 2023).

Initially, the objectives of the various accompaniment mechanisms, programs and structures were to meet the different needs of entrepreneurs and to provide easier access to all the resources they need throughout the entrepreneurial process (Cao & Shi, 2021; Guerrero et al., 2021). Afterwards, there was an evolution towards a broader concept which is the entrepreneurial accompaniment process thus encompassing several measures to incite, encourage and assist entrepreneurs from awareness raising through training and specific and personalized accompaniment programs (diagnosis of profile and expectations, training in business creation, development of the business plan, etc.) to achieve financing and even after the actual start of the project (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023a; Ouahi & El Agy, 2023; Verzat et al., 2023).

The word accompaniment is linguistically defined as accompanied, accompanies, accompaniment, that is to say a companion and/or accompany, its origin goes back to the Latin word "cumpanis", which means "to share news with others" (Benchedda & Meherzi, 2023).

Semantically, it is defined as a group of sentences that meet and then branch out from this term or are replaced by according to the places and areas of use, including: lead, follow, instruct, supervise, listen, accompany, support, advance with, direct, ensure success, connect, keep, pair, receive in a group discussion, mediation, etc. (Boucenna et al., 2022).

Indeed, the work of Fayolle & Nakara (2010) proves a positive correlation between accompaniment and entrepreneurial success; any entrepreneur will need a set of resources (access to information, money, logistics, the know-how of consultants or qualified personnel, etc.) to see their project become a sustainable business thanks to the services of accompaniment structures (Lakdali & Diani, 2022).

For Alaoui et al. (2019), accompaniment is an approach that involves two essential entities, namely the accompaniment provider and the person being accompanied, the latter being concerned with setting up their project while the accompaniment provider exchanges useful information with them, transmitting knowledge and skills to them in order to help them better carry out their project.

Cuzin & Fayolle (2006) define accompaniment as an inter-individual relationship and describe it as a posture that allows you to "join someone to go where they are going at the same time as them. This definition encompasses different dimensions that are characterized by (Benhaddouch, 2022):

- Movement (progress and joining with someone),
- Action (project management, commitment, dynamisation and start-up),
- Solidarity (proximity, partnership, alliance, relationship and joint mobilization).

According to Benhaddouch (2022), the definition previously stated, despite the diversity of accompaniment actions, allows for extension to three key dimensions, regardless of the sector of application:

- The relational dimension (between a accompaniment worker and a person being accompanied);
- The temporal dimension (approach over time to achieve a goal);
- The individualized dimension (adaptation to specific needs or trajectories).

For their part, Schmitt & Julien (2020) propose to approach entrepreneurial accompaniment around two questions, namely "who is the entrepreneur? (Normative act)" and "What does the

entrepreneur do? (Act rationally)", since they have largely conditioned the way in which entrepreneurial accompaniment has developed.

According to Paul (2012), accompaniment is presented as a space within which the professional creates the conditions for a person to practice with him to describe what his situation is, to pose and construct what his problem is, to identify what his resources are, those he has until now and those he will have to acquire, to seek together how to mobilize these resources within a given environment, to express his choices, exercise his decision-making power and concretely develop his power to act.

This definition reveals that accompaniment a project leader requires different levels of services, which are reception, information, assistance, training, advice and post-creation monitoring (Benhaddouch, 2022).

Messeghem et al. (2014) define entrepreneurial accompaniment as a process organized by a third party, taking place over time and allowing one (or more) entrepreneur(s) to benefit from a learning dynamic (training, advice, etc.), to access resources (financial, information, etc.), networking, services (administrative, accommodation, etc.) and decision-making accompaniment (coaching, mentoring, etc.).

Soro (2021) states that a successful accompaniment approach requires that it be effective, efficient, affective and effectiveness. The first characteristic refers to the achievement of previously set objectives and in particular the creation of a large number of sustainable businesses. Then, an effective approach is one that offers better accompaniment conditions (easy, fast and inexpensive access for entrepreneurs to the resources they need). The notion of affectivity aims to go beyond the technical aspect in the accompaniment approach and to provide the entrepreneur with psychological accompaniment to reduce the doubt that can prevail and put the relationship in difficulty. Finally, effectiveness refers to the satisfaction of the actors and implies the relevance of the means mobilized by each of these actors during the accompaniment process. According to Dokou et al. (2000), entrepreneurial accompaniment takes the form of a real rapprochement between current or potential creators, on the one hand, and local institutions, on the other hand, which have the technical, human and financial resources to ensure the development of the companies to be launched (Abdennadher and Boudabbous, 2023a).

Indeed, the success of the project and its sustainability require the effort of an entire system starting from the entrepreneur himself (profile, characteristics, motivations, etc.), his entourage (network of relationships, family, etc.) to arrive at all the accompaniment structures (Abdennadher, 2021).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem

Depuis In recent decades, entrepreneurship has been increasingly considered in most economies around the world as an important instrument for improving competitiveness, economic growth and increasing employment opportunities (Gomes et al., 2023). It is for these reasons that decision-makers have committed to implementing policies to stimulate, accompaniment and assist entrepreneurial activities (Ragmoun, 2023). A more globalist approach has emerged; according to Isenberg (2011), this is the entrepreneurial ecosystem approach which goes further in that it emphasizes not only the establishment of an opportune environment for entrepreneurship, but above all the complex interactions between the different political, financial, human, cultural, market and infrastructural, professional and institutional dimensions, the combinations of which give each ecosystem an idiosyncratic character (Bhandari & Mohite, 2023). The term ecosystem was first used in biology by the English botanist George Tansley in 1935, who aimed to define a dynamic whole comprising a biotope environment (climate, soil,

water, etc.) and the biocenosis (microorganisms, animals, plants, etc.) found there, which made it possible to understand the course of exchanges between the environment and living organisms according to the functioning processes of ecosystems (Fontan & Lévesque, 2023). Historically, the concept of ecosystem was used in the field of entrepreneurship by Valdez (1988) in his article "The entrepreneurial ecosystem: toward a theory of new firm formation", which aimed to analyze the start-up phenomenon that encompasses current market conditions, the immediate environment and the result of the relationships of potential entrepreneurs (Masoumi et al., 2022). According to Theodoraki (2021), in the field of entrepreneurship, the notion of ecosystem has emerged in academic and policy conversations as a metaphor.

Messeghem et al. (2023) argue that an entrepreneurial ecosystem is the set of interdependent actors and environmental factors, both national and regional, that interactively foster the dynamics of entrepreneurial activities, ultimately contributing to the development of a regional entrepreneurial economy.

According to Stam and Van de Ven (2021), an entrepreneurial ecosystem can be defined by the regional context where various interdependent actors and factors interact with each other to foster business creation and ensure their performance.

For Mason & Brown (2014) an entrepreneurial ecosystem is composed of entrepreneurial actors (potential and existing), entrepreneurial organizations, institutions and entrepreneurial processes that come together formally and informally to connect, arbitrate and govern performance within the local entrepreneurial environment.

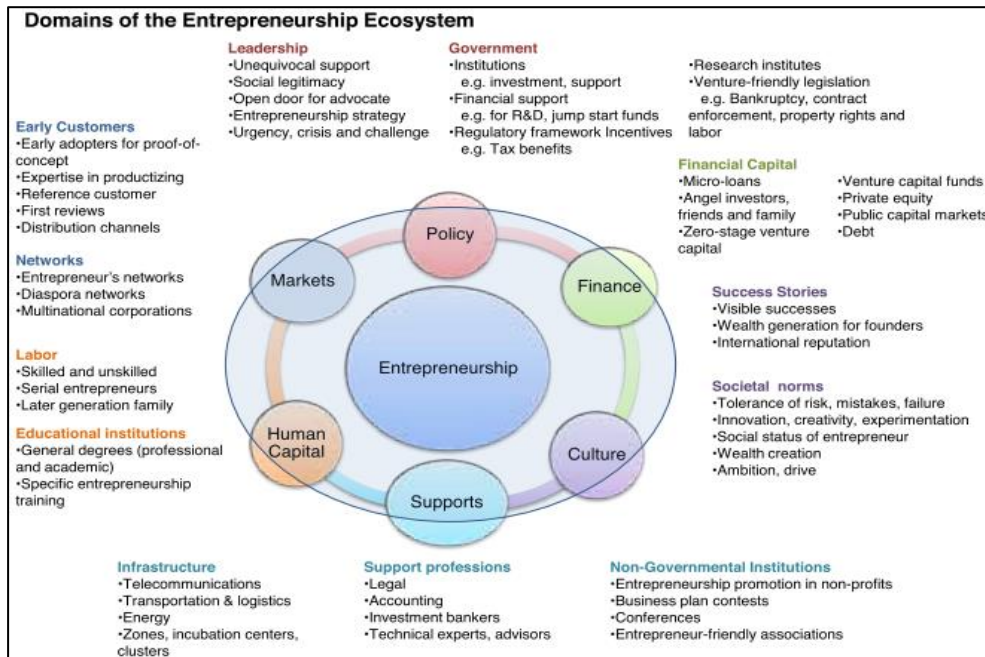
Thus, we can say that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is the set of diverse, interdependent and interconnected actors in a well-defined geographical region that exert a positive influence on entrepreneurial activities and, potentially, on the socio-economic environment as a whole.

According to Pereira et al. (2020), an entrepreneurial ecosystem helps not only to create new businesses, but also to maintain and develop existing ones. At this level, Sarma et al. (2022) believe that the growth of new businesses depends on the characteristics of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Spigel (2017), distinguishes three categories of characteristics (Grandbois et al., 2022):

- Cultural (values and attitudes),
- Social (workers' talents, investment capital, networks, mentors and role models),
- Material (infrastructure, universities, accompaniment services, market dynamics, politics and governance).

For his part, Isenberg (2011) proposed a structural modeling of the entrepreneurial ecosystem by encompassing six domains (politics, finance, culture, accompaniment, human capital and market) that contain twelve elements, such as success stories, financial angels (business angels), infrastructure, incubators, education, etc. (Theodoraki, 2021).

Figure 1 : The entrepreneurial ecosystem



Source : Isenberg (2011)

In relation to accompaniment, Theodoraki & Messegem (2016) talk about the entrepreneurial accompaniment ecosystem which brings together, according to them, public policies, general or specialist accompaniment structures, experts (accountants, lawyers, consultants, etc.), research and financing organizations, as well as entrepreneur clubs and events to raise awareness and strengthen entrepreneurship.

For Segond et al. (2022), an ecosystem is driven by a systemic dynamic that involves the interconnection between its different components and actors, and an evolutionary dynamic resulting in structural changes that lead it towards better performance.

It is important to specify, according to Burvill et al. (2018), that the resources available in ecosystems are the foundations on which a start-up can develop. If a company is part of a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, it will be better able to identify and exploit the resources in its environment, such as knowledge or financial resources (Veilleux et al., 2022). Once the company has accessed the various resources available in its ecosystem, it can better exploit market opportunities, grow, create value, and achieve a competitive advantage. According to Lipskier (2023), newly created companies are the product of a successful ecosystem and a resource for the actors that compose it. Stam & Van de Ven (2021) add that the success of the company will depend not only on direct factors, such as financing opportunities or the availability of labor, but also on more indirect factors, such as the role of institutions and government in creating a culture that fosters entrepreneurship. For our part, we believe that what characterizes the entrepreneurial ecosystem is the diversity of actors who intervene to encourage, promote and accompaniment entrepreneurial activities, and this, during all stages of project implementation (before, during and after launch), but also and above all the interconnection between them to guarantee effectiveness (objectives/results), efficiency (resources/results) and relevance (resources/objectives), and subsequently, the performance of the entire ecosystem.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Through this contribution, our objective is to explore accompaniment in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem by seeking to find elements of response to the question of how is accompaniment presented in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem?

To find elements of response to our research question, we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach by opting for a multiple case study survey. This approach is particularly suited to investigate in depth a recent and complex event or research object (Gallagher & Marceau, 2020).

Indeed, qualitative research makes it possible to answer questions such as "why?" or "how?", and is interested in the determinants of the behaviors of actors and actresses (Gallagher & Marceau, 2020; Sawadogo, 2020). According to Sawadogo (2020), qualitative data collection methods aim to:

- Obtain contextualized information, observed in the facts and by the facts, process and interpret it, produce knowledge;
- Contribute to the understanding of often neglected aspects;
- Achieve an "inside" understanding of the representations, attitudes, motivations and practices of a particular group or social universe, through discourse analysis and observation of practices;
- Compare discourse with real practices in order to identify possible contradictions between what is said and what is done;
- Involve the community around issues that are dear to it.

We opted for an ecosystemic methodological approach using semi-directive interviews (Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2016). According to Ben Letaifa (2009) this approach is suitable for (Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2016):

- Conceptualizing the relationships of actors through the notion of the ecosystem,
- Interpreting the complexity of relationships that can evolve over time,
- Exploring these strategic relationships with a systemic logic.

In this contribution, we focus on the inter-actor dimension of this approach which aims to understand the collective strategies of accompaniment actors within the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

We interviewed different groups of actors:

- Two executives of accompaniment structures,
- Two executives of financing structures,
- Five entrepreneurs.

The data were collected through semi-directive interviews conducted face-to-face during the month of October 2023. The overall duration is almost 7 hours and the average duration is 46 minutes per interview.

To promote the accumulation of knowledge that allows theoretical saturation to be reached (Hlady-Rispal, 2015), an interview guide was constructed and adapted to the type of respondent covering the following themes:

- For executives of accompaniment and financing structures
 - The organizational characteristics of the structure (services offered, specificities, differentiation, etc.),
 - The characteristics of the ecosystem (interactions with other actors, types of relationships, etc.),
 - The characteristics of its performance (performance criteria, impact of ecosystem relationships on performance, etc.).
- For entrepreneurs
 - The characteristics of the project (sector of activity, launch date, etc.),
 - The exchanges made with the actors of the accompaniment ecosystem (services received, nature of intervention, etc.),

- The perception of the intervention of the different actors of the ecosystem (by actors, nature of interaction between actors, etc.).

Table 1: The survey sample (accompagnement and financing structures)

	Structure	Respondent	Duration of the interview	Code
Accompagnement structures	Business center (Sfax)	Accompagnement advisor	45 minutes	AA 1
	Business incubator (Sfax)	Accompagnement advisor	50 minutes	AA 2
Financing structures	TSB ¹ (Sfax)	Financial framework	35 minutes	FF 1
	SMEFB ² (Sfax)	Financial framework	40 minutes	FF 2

Table 2 : The survey sample (entrepreneurs)

Entrepreneur	Gender	Age	Activity	City	Duration of the interview
1	Women	45 ans	Garment factory	Sfax	45 minutes
2	Man	34 ans	<i>Manufacturing of cleaning products</i>	Sfax	50 minutes
3	Women	35 ans	Traditional pastry	Sfax	60 minutes
4	Man	36 ans	Aluminum carpentry	Sfax	50 minutes
5	Man	40 ans	Digital printing	Sfax	45 minutes

The interviewees all belong to the Sfax region, in order to respect one of the major specificities of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, namely the belonging of the different actors to a single region (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). The data collected were subject to manual content analysis. They were recorded, transcribed in their entirety and are presented in verbatim form. These verbatims subsequently underwent thematic coding in relation to our research problem (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021).

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

In recent years, there has been a major interest in the emergence of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in both developed and developing economies, which has made it possible to understand how different actors and institutions participate in the establishment of a sustainable

¹ Tunisian Solidarity Bank.

² Small and Medium Enterprise Financing Bank.

and resilient ecosystem, and in the creation of the attributes of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Segond et al., 2022).

For the entrepreneurs interviewed, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is considered rich and diverse thanks to the policies pursued for years. These policies aim to establish a general economic climate conducive to the creation of businesses and to stimulate entrepreneurship through a set of specific incentive measures (financial aid, tax exemptions, etc.) or by the establishment of new structures and accompaniment organizations (business incubators, etc.). Studies have shown that entrepreneurial development depends closely on the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing regulatory and administrative constraints on entrepreneurial activity, promoting entrepreneurship training, facilitating access to finance, technology, innovation, etc. (Sabri & Hanif, 2020; Benaziz & Koubaa, 2017).

“For years, policies aimed at promoting entrepreneurial activities have been increasing in number, which has made business creation a career choice for many graduates.” (Entrepreneur 2)

“For years, Tunisia has seen a proliferation of small entrepreneurs who want to make a living from their projects. We have collaborated with dozens of people, women and men, who have decided to embark on the entrepreneurial adventure to escape unemployment. The orientation of these young people towards entrepreneurship is due, among other things, to the awareness of decision-makers who have understood the interest in promoting the creation of businesses to curb youth unemployment by establishing a rich and diversified entrepreneurial ecosystem.” (FF 1)

Perceived as the best formula for solving the socio-economic equation, the creation of businesses and, in general, entrepreneurship are placed at the center of the economic reforms launched in Tunisia since the 90s. Efforts have given rise to a rich and complete entrepreneurial ecosystem where all the components are combined; training, accompaniment, incubation, financing, expertise, etc. (APII, 2016). Thus, in addition to its contribution to the creation of wealth and added value, entrepreneurial activities have become an essential tool for giving young people the opportunity to integrate into economic life and subsequently guarantee their financial autonomy.

In recent decades, public authorities have made efforts to promote business creation, through the implementation of considerable measures and resources to raise awareness and encourage entrepreneurial activities in order to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023b).

“The entrepreneurial ecosystem is truly rich with actors of different vocations. There are accompaniment structures such as business centers, business incubators, the National Agency for Employment and Independent Work (NAEIW), the Agency for the Promotion of Industry and Innovation (APII), the Agency for the Promotion of Agricultural Investments (APAI), etc. And financing structures such as the Tunisian Solidarity Bank (TSB), the National Fund for the Promotion of Crafts and Small Trades (NFPCST), the SME Financing Bank (SMEFB), etc.” (AA 2)

The desire to promote entrepreneurial initiative has spread widely in Tunisia. The various structures set up have different missions affecting all stages of the business creation process, which refers to the coherence of the activities of each actor in the entrepreneurial ecosystem which remains an essential condition determining the success of the emergence of the ecosystem (Roundy et al., 2018). Thus, entrepreneurial accompaniment, an essential component of the ecosystem, presents itself as an essential tool to deal with the different types of obstacles encountered by entrepreneurs throughout the process of creating their businesses.

“It is quite clear that the public authorities have made the necessary efforts to establish a

favorable, rich and diversified entrepreneurial ecosystem to meet the different needs of entrepreneurs. Business centers and incubators present in all governorates of the country. Sectoral structures, such as APII and APAI, not to mention the Export Promotion Center (EPC) which has opened the borders to entrepreneurs seeking to expand their markets.” (Entrepreneur 5)

Indeed, the different types of structures and accompaniment programs that intervene in the process of business creation offer information, accompaniment and advice to entrepreneurs to enable them to realize and develop their businesses (Clément, 2023; Fakhri et al., 2023). Certainly, accompaniment for entrepreneurship and the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems has moved to the top of the Tunisian national agenda for job creation and economic growth in recent years, since the entrepreneurial ecosystem plays a key role in entrepreneurial success throughout the value chain, as it provides the necessary infrastructure, access to knowledge, networks, financing, etc.

“Since the 1990s, Tunisia has focused on entrepreneurship as a vector for job creation. There was the creation of APII, the national network of business incubators within universities, micro-project financing structures, etc. These organizations are designed to stimulate and actively accompaniment entrepreneurial activity.” (Entrepreneur 3)

By analogy with the notion of ecosystem mentioned by Verstraete & Jouison (2018), we can say that talking about the ecosystem in entrepreneurship refers to the whole offering more or less favorable conditions for the life of the organisms populating it; the ecosystem is a broad concept because it also includes organizations and what links them.

“The organizations of the entrepreneurial ecosystem are rich. They include organizations, such as accelerators, incubators, collaborative workspaces and other accompaniment programs, for the dissemination of the culture and spirit of entrepreneurship among young people and to encourage them to create their own jobs.” (AA 1)

Our interviewed entrepreneurs agree on the essential contribution of the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem which supports most companies in their launch and development. However, they are unanimously dissatisfied with certain points such as the insufficiency of the funding granted and the cumbersome and lengthy administrative procedures as well as the rigidity of the eligibility criteria of certain aid programs (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023b; Haddad & Melliti, 2018).

“The weak point of the entrepreneurial environment lies in the two aspects, administrative and financial. The first aspect slows down the process of creating businesses by the complexity, the heaviness and the slowness of the administrative procedures. The second aspect does not meet the financial needs of the entrepreneurs; the amounts granted do not correspond to the needs of the projects and activities.” (Entrepreneur 1)

It turns out that the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem is rich and diversified, which reflects an ecosystemic vision of the different organizations involved in the activities of a given sector. However, according to the entrepreneurs interviewed, the contribution of the entrepreneurial ecosystem is mixed; the services of the different structures are often considered too slow and not sufficiently in line with the enthusiasm and ambition of the entrepreneurs. We are therefore witnessing efforts that have given rise to a rich and complete entrepreneurial ecosystem where all the factors are combined (training, accompaniment, incubation, financing, expertise, etc.) (Haddad & Melliti, 2018; Paturel & Maalel, 2016), but which remains complex and compartmentalized, which hinders entrepreneurial initiatives.

Indeed, Tunisian national experts consider the entrepreneurial environment to be weak, which is why the national entrepreneurship score is 3.7, ranking Tunisia 47th out of 51 countries participating in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor national expert survey (2023). In addition,

according to the GSE Index (Global Startup Ecosystem) (2023), Tunisia has regained its position as the 2nd country in North Africa, despite a drop of 8 places in the index, to rank 91st worldwide. This rise in the North African ranking is mainly due to the decline of Morocco, which was more marked than that of Tunisia, which has fallen in the index every year since the introduction of the index in 2017 (GSE, 2023). On the other hand, beyond the prism of individual values, the entrepreneur benefits from an environment where the relational fabric between organizations and individuals is dense, in other words an ecosystem that must be characterized by a network of links allowing effective interactions between actors (Fontan & Lévesque, 2023; Lipskier, 2023; Stam & Van de Ven, 2021), which is not the case in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

“We all know the majority of structures present in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem and the contribution of each of them. However, what harms this ecosystem is the isolation of these actors.” (Entrepreneur 4)

The ecosystem reflects a form of network that leaves room for a logic of collaboration around entrepreneurial activities. According to Moore (1993, 1996), what distinguishes the business ecosystem is the integration of multiple interconnected organizations around a pivotal company (Krivý, 2023). The executives of the structures interviewed confirm this interconnection.

“The different structures of the entrepreneurial ecosystem collaborate together to succeed in the entrepreneurial vocation of the country’s economic policy. Our efforts intersect and our objectives are the same. What we are looking for is the accompaniment of entrepreneurs in their journeys.” (FF 2)

“All the accompaniment structures of the entrepreneurial ecosystem are distinguished by well-defined missions inherent in all stages of the business creation process. And because all stages of the creation process are interconnected, the efforts of the different structures must follow this logic of cooperation, which is the case in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem.” (AA 1)

This position of the executives of the accompaniment structures interviewed is not shared by the entrepreneurs in our sample who proclaim the absence of an interconnection between the actors of the accompaniment of the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

“What I noticed through my entrepreneurial experience is the lack of coordination between the different accompaniment structures. Personally, I encountered problems during my creation process in relation to the fluidity of file circulation, erroneous information and total disconnection with my process, etc.” (Entrepreneur 2)

“What caused me a lot of delay during my entrepreneurial experience is the lack of coordination between the different accompaniment structures that I requested. I have the impression that each structure operates in an isolated world. A lot of contradictory information that increases the stress during the process.” (Entrepreneur 1)

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report (2023), Tunisia obtains its best scores in terms of perception of entrepreneurship by society, innovative products, networking and skills in the field of business creation. Key factors for Tunisia to succeed in its policy of promoting sustainable entrepreneurship and the creation of a new generation of entrepreneurs, but which needs a catalyst that can only be a better pooling and coordination of the efforts of all the actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Neck et al. (2004) highlight two characteristics of the entrepreneurial ecosystem: first, it is characterized by an entanglement of links between the actors and a composition of attributes intended to accompaniment entrepreneurship; then, the creation of companies constitutes the purpose of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Indeed, an ecosystem is driven by two types of dynamics: a systemic dynamic that involves the interconnection between the different components and actors of an ecosystem; and an evolutionary dynamic resulting in structural changes that lead it towards better performance

(Segond et al., 2022). The speeches of the executives of the accompaniment structures interviewed go against the statements of the entrepreneurs in our sample. This contradiction reflects a weakness in accompaniment in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and may reflect, in a way, a discrepancy between the official discourse and the reality on the ground experienced and perceived by entrepreneurs.

The business ecosystem, defined by Moore (1996), requires orchestrating a group of actors to realize new value on a market (Krivý, 2023). This concept refers to environments where entrepreneurial activities develop; the actors in this ecosystem must forge collaborative links and produce complementary and interdependent activities to promote and support the efforts of entrepreneurs.

“The success of entrepreneurs' efforts depends on several conditions relating to the entrepreneur himself, but also on the synergy that must be established between the different structures of the entrepreneurial ecosystem set up. This is not clearly established, especially with regard to the interconnection of actors.” (Entrepreneur 3)

The lack of coordination and interaction between the different actors and, in some cases, the absence of accompaniment during some phases of the creation process constitutes the weak link in the entrepreneurial value chain which remains ambiguous in the eyes of project leaders. In addition, the complementarity and interdependence between the actors encourage the adoption of an overall strategy in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. According to Theodoraki (2021), the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial ecosystem depends heavily on the optimization of connections between its heterogeneous actors. The heterogeneity of the ecosystem's actors increases its complexity, particularly due to the diversity of accompaniment structures (Nicholls-Nixon et al., 2021).

“It is quite normal to have an entrepreneurial ecosystem with isolated structures as long as there is no strategy that governs the whole. As an entrepreneur, I have always criticized the lack of coordination between the different entrepreneurial accompaniment structures, which affects the outcome of entrepreneurial adventures.” (Entrepreneur 5)

The lack of an overall strategy in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem as well as the complexity of coordination are elements that hinder entrepreneurial dynamics, especially in an unstable socio-economic context. The adoption of an ecosystem strategy adapted to the Tunisian context and especially to the specificities of each accompaniment structure can contribute to improving the functioning of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The implementation of a clear, realistic and achievable ecosystem strategy makes it possible to link the internal and external organizational characteristics of the actors in order to identify the ideal strategies for each of them (Theodoraki, 2021).

Thus, the efforts made to promote entrepreneurial activities remain to be perfected in order to encourage and consolidate the development of sustainable entrepreneurship. It is therefore important to strengthen the existing accompaniment ecosystem and energize it by creating the necessary synergies and interconnections between all the actors in order to establish a high-performance ecosystem (Paturel & Maalel, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem is relatively young since the majority of its actors were created in the early 1990s with a predominance of accompaniment and assistance structures for business creation. In this contribution, we tried to answer the question of how is accompaniment presented in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem? Our objective was to explore accompaniment in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem in order to understand its role in supporting entrepreneurial activities.

Our results show that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is rich and diversified thanks to the policies pursued for years and the efforts made by the public authorities in recent decades through the implementation of measures and considerable means to promote business creation (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023b; Paturel & Maalel, 2016). The various structures set up have different missions and intervene in all stages of the business creation process (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023a; Clément, 2023; Fakhri et al., 2023). However, some shortcomings appear in relation to the funding granted and the cumbersome and lengthy administrative procedures as well as the rigidity of the eligibility criteria of certain aid programs (Abdennadher & Boudabbous, 2023b; Haddad & Melliti, 2018; Paturel & Maalel, 2016).

Our research has shown the richness and diversity of the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem, except that its contribution is mixed because the services of the different structures are often considered too slow and not sufficiently in line with the enthusiasm and ambition of entrepreneurs. According to Paturel & Maalel (2016), Tunisian accompaniment structures are not effective and are relatively efficient and effective, which allows us to conclude that they are not fully efficient.

In addition, unlike the executives interviewed, the entrepreneurs in our sample admit the absence of an interconnection between the accompaniment actors of the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem, which reflects a discordance between the official discourse and the reality on the ground experienced and perceived by entrepreneurs. The absence of interconnection between the actors proves the non-existence of an overall strategy (Theodoraki, 2021) in the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystem, which hinders entrepreneurial dynamics especially in a fragile socio-economic context.

Like any research work, this work has certain limitations. A first limitation is linked to the small number of cases in our sample and to the study of the entrepreneurial ecosystem of a single region (Sfax). Interviewing other entrepreneurs, managers of several accompaniment structures and studying ecosystems in other regions will enrich the research.

A second limitation is common in exploratory research in entrepreneurship since we call on the memory of the interviewees, which refers to a memory bias due to the fact that when responding, the individual attaches importance only to the elements that he remembers, and a rationalization bias since the interviewees tend to make coherent the phenomena that they evoke. The use of triangulation with other data collection techniques will allow us to overcome these limitations.

In addition, we have opted for exploratory research. Supplementing our work with quantitative research will allow us to overcome the limits of the research and will offer greater external validity to our research.

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