## **Adverse incorporation and local economies of peace**

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This article challenges the peace- and statebuilding reflex towards integrating hitherto excluded people into development and markets. What is missing, it argues, is an understanding of the adverse terms by which local populations and communities are already incorporated into systems that are exploitative. Applying an ‘adverse incorporation’ analytical frame to a community of small farmers in Tunisia, it shows how local tensions and grievances are rooted in the interfacing of renewed marketisation at the national level with longer running trajectories of development and change at the local level whose terms may already be unpopular or contested.

Keywords: agrarian change; peasants; political economy; marketisation; transitions

## **Introduction**

Work to consolidate Tunisia’s nascent democracy in the decade following the uprising and Revolution of 2010/11 has reflected liberal peace and statebuilding ideas that the best way of securing peace is through the building of democratic institutions and market economies (Pogodda, 2020). In the democratisation and statebuilding spheres, the focus of multilateral, bilateral and NGO programming and policy included support for Tunisia’s electoral processes, constitution-building, and strengthening accountability and the rule of law. In the development sphere, International Financial Institution (IFI) prescription and intervention has seen an intensification of the economic liberalisation and marketisation agenda undertaken during the Ben Ali period that has prioritised private sector development and foreign direct investment (Poggoda, 2020; Görmüş and Akçalı, 2019; Hanieh, 2015; Ayeb, 2019). The potential for a civil peace to develop from the bottom up in Tunisia has been severely constrained by a failure to reduce economic inequalities (Pogodda, 2020); while much of the transition period and the country’s recent authoritarian turn has seen the continuation of popular protest, including rural-based protest, in response to deteriorating conditions and the failure of new economic opportunities to materialise (Gana and Taleb, 2019).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Prescription and intervention in the development sphere has unfolded despite systematic critique of marketisation in transitional and post-conflict settings (e.g. Richmond, 2022; Duffield, 2007; Pugh, 2005; Pugh et al., 2008; MacGinty and Richmond, 2013). Intended for bringing hitherto excluded people into development and markets and removing structural barriers to access (Jantzi and Jantzi, 2009) among other things, marketisation has been criticised for its potential to provoke tensions and grievances that risk a return to violence and civic unrest. For example, by disrupting the livelihoods of the poor, intensifying social tensions and weakening already fragile states. Debates continue to be had in academic settings over the purpose and consequences of the liberal peace, and of the sources of the disappointing or at best ambiguous track record of the international community in the post-Cold War period: for example, such as seen in the relapse to authoritarianism and repression in the Arab Spring nations and in the high recidivism rate for civil wars (Westendorf, 2015). Yet this critical literature has not made any real impact on practice, with mainstream policy and programming continuing to operate according to the view that “when markets are liberalized, land privatized, investment attracted and formal economic activity increased, the results will be peace- as opposed to conflict-promoting” (Millar, 2016, p.3; Jantzi and Jantzi, 2009; Donais and McCandless, 2017).

This article contributes to an emerging agenda in peace research that is seeking a way out of this impasse. This agenda has come in the form of calls for new, local and everyday analyses of economies of peace (Millar, 2016; Menzel, 2019; Vogel, 2022) that may provide practitioners and policymakers with new evidence about the impacts of marketisation locally. These accounts can offer, it is suggested, a corrective to broad brush treatments that deal with the macro-level and associated policy prescriptions (Millar, 2016; Distler et al., 2018; Vogel, 2022). Such macro-level perspectives are criticised for overlooking local difference and the ways marketisation impacts communities and the meanings made of these impacts locally. For instance, when liberal peace settings facilitate the roll-out of FDI-led agriculture development projects and what grievances and implications for peace might follow (Millar, 2016; Menzel, 2019).

This article offers a series of contributions to our understanding of the impacts and meanings of marketisation and evolving power relations across transition trajectories (Lai, 2024; Distler et al., 2018). In offering these, it responds to a limitation in current economies of peace work: that far from being excluded, populations in transition settings are oftentimes already incorporated into capitalist development trajectories and markets, albeit on adverse terms. Such terms have been shaped such as by national processes of economic liberalisation, market integration and agricultural modernisation which generate ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ locally and may already be unpopular or contested. A focus on these terms in transition settings, it is suggested here, offers useful explanatory insight into local tensions, grievances and the implications for peace where local economies have become sites of interface between renewed marketisation and longer running trajectories of capitalist development and change.

In this vein, two main contributions are offered here. First, the article presents new evidence of the way local tensions and grievances may be found where renewed marketisation in a transition setting touches down on a community that is already incorporated into capitalist development and markets. And second, it explains these tensions and grievances by way of the ‘adverse’ terms that govern this incorporation, and which emerge, consolidate and operate over significant timeframes. The article does this through a novel application of an ‘adverse incorporation’ frame which focuses on the social relations that shape disadvantage. Through this lens, we can see how marketisation in transition settings may signal less a ‘rupture’ with the past than the consolidation of historical development trajectories (Distler et al., 2018), where local grievances seem to reflect there already being ‘too much’ rather than ‘not enough’ market, and through which existing distributions of political and economic power might become strengthened and consolidated. Drawing on the case of a rural community in Tunisia between 2015 and 2021, the contributions of this article are developed through i) an integration of distinct literatures on economies of peace, agrarian political economy, peasant studies and critical development studies; and ii) an application of agrarian concepts and methods to the case. Overall, these tools provide us with a novel point of departure vis-à-vis mainstream practice with radically different implications for policy and practice. Against a misplaced emphasis on fostering peace by integrating hitherto excluded people into development and markets and removing barriers to access, we should consider how to redress the adverse terms by which local populations and communities are already incorporated into exploitative systems.

The choice of Tunisia as a case is significant. The country’s constrained prospects for civil peace reflects a failure to reduce economic inequalities (Pogodda, 2020; Richmond, 2006) against a backdrop where new and lingering forms of precarity and immiseration drove an “explosion of demands for social justice in rural areas” (Gana, 2013, p.210; 2012) that led to the ouster of Ben Ali and initiated the country’s transition. Farmer mobilisation during the uprising included sectoral organising, such as the blockage of tomato processing facilities in Cap Bon; demands for land reform and land occupations; and calls to democratise the Tunisian Union for Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP) which had operated as a node of state power (Gana, 2011). In the background were two decades of agricultural restructuring that had seen the systematic neglect of small farms and rising inequality, subsidy reductions and mounting production costs that were pushing small farmers into debt and out of agriculture (Gana, 2012; Elloumi, 2013; Elloumi, 2015; Fautras, 2015).

This article is structured as follows. First, the article and its contribution is located within emerging work on the economic local turn. The case background and methodological approach is discussed, and the findings presented. The relevance of the findings is discussed in relation to this emerging work on local economies of peace and some future direction suggested.

## **Economies of peace and adverse incorporation**

In the main, economies of peace have been treated at the macro-level (Distler et al., 2018) within the framework of the political economy of transition (Pugh et al, 2008) and through debates over the promotion of liberal democracy and market economics. This work has challenged an accommodation to neoliberal economics within mainstream transitional and post-conflict practice (Lemay-Hébert and Murshed, 2016; Jantzi and Jantzi, 2009) that is anchored in liberal assumptions about the propensity for conflict being reduced when individuals, groups or nations are integrated into ‘modern society’ through greater economic interdependence and exchange and shared values. The range of practices and interventions in the development sphere have not departed far from earlier Washington consensus prescriptions (Distler et al., 2018, Willett, 2008; Pugh, 2011) that include macro-economic stabilisation, fiscal austerity, reducing the role of the state, the promotion of the private sector, and an emphasis on foreign direct investment and exports for promoting growth. The transitional or post-conflict environment which emerges is seen to reflect a coalescence of exogenous and domestic economic forces and actors (Heathershaw, 2013), with the rudiments of peacebuilding economies including macroeconomic leverage by international actors through loan conditionalities, the emergence of ‘clientelistic neoliberalism’ through elite bargaining in the economy, and a unity between domestic elites and international actors around promoting private capital accumulation, a weakened and low-wage labour force, and minimising the state’s role in development (Pugh, 2020). Examination of the relationships between marketisation and peace in such settings has focused on economic hardship and marginalisation (Hoddie and Hartzell, 2013; Keen, 2003; Hanlon, 2005; Casteneda, 2009) and the conditions for sustainable peace (Woodward, 2013).

Calls (Millar, 2016) to widen the scope of economies of peace work to attend to local or micro-level effects of marketisation, and to the tensions and grievances that are generated locally, have seen an emerging scholarship in this area. For instance, there has been work to examine the local impact of FDI-led development projects (Millar, 2016; Menzel, 2015), commercial land acquisitions (Hennings, 2019; Cavanagh, 2018) and agribusiness expansion (Grajales, 2021) in transitional and post-conflict settings, sharing similar concerns and questions with proximate work on economic hardship and marginalisation in pre-conflict settings (Millar, 2016; Willett, 2008; Keen, 2003; Hartzell et al., 2010; Storey, 1999; Uvin, 2010; Verwimp, 2005; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008; Cramer and Richards, 2011).

The adverse incorporation analytical frame offers a new way of engaging with local tensions and grievances in terms of the relationship between processes of marketisation associated with liberal peace- and statebuilding intervention on the one hand; and the ways in which populations have been adversely incorporated into historical development trajectories on the other. Emanating from the development field (Hickey and du Toit, 2013; 2007) and yet to be applied to peace and conflict studies or peacebuilding, the frame can be applied at different scales (local, regional, national) for shedding light on the particular patterns of social relations that people have become inserted into; and how those social relations govern the production, distribution and access to material and non-material resources in ways that are highly unfavourable to them. Applied to rural settings, it permits a treatment of the economic and socio-political dimensions of these through tools and theoretical resources from several interlinked fields that include agrarian political economy, peasant studies and critical development studies (Bernstein, 2010; Borras, 2009; 2023; Veltmeyer and Wise, 2018). For example, the ways that patterns of severely constrained household incomes and dispossession of land and resources are prefigured by mechanisms of rent and debt that transfer wealth from small farmers to landlords and other economic elites. While people may not be prevented from entering into these social relations, their scope for exiting can become severely curtailed*:*

*These conditions [that prevent exiting] are often established by indebtedness and/or the withholding of wages until the end of a contract, which may be combined with such abuses as imprisonment and restrictions on physical movement, threatened or actual violence (both psychological and physical, and both against a worker and against her family or co-workers) and/or the confiscation of documents and possessions […] the preclusion of exit can [also] arise from the workers’ own perceptions of their obligations (O’Neill, 2011). Their need to support families, raise dowries, honour debts and so on are powerful disciplining mechanisms which can very effectively be harnessed to the cause of exploitation* (Philips, 2013, p.178)*.*

Not unlike emerging work treating the structural barriers to positive peace at the local level (e.g. Tschunkert 2024), attention to the scope for political participation, citizenship and access to justice also feature in an adverse incorporation lens, for example where limited access to justice and political participation narrowly circumscribes opportunities to contest adverse terms within the political economy. Discussing seasonal migrants in India for instance, Mosse (2010, p.1165) suggests they experience “persistent exploitation partly because they do not have the power to defend their rights, to press cases for wage payment or injury compensation. They are excluded from justice by opaque procedures, informal agreements that leave no paper trail, and by the interconnected interests of more powerful actors (employers, lawyers, labour officers, even union representatives).”

This social relational focus is underpinned by an understanding of poverty and disadvantage as a function of people’s integration or exposure to particular kinds of development and markets rather than as their being marginal to or excluded from them (Hickey and du Toit, 2013; 2007; Mosse, 2010; Philips, 2013). It represents a significant departure from mainstream ‘residual’ approaches in development theory and practice which have fielded modernization-oriented development projects in transitional and post-conflict that seek to integrate populations more deeply into markets (Jantzi and Jantzi, 2009; McCandles, 2021; Pugh, 2010). These view poverty and the consequences for peace and conflict as arising from people’s *exclusion* from the political economy and underpin efforts to incorporate them into mainstream economic activity as “an unproblematic good in itself” (du Toit, 2009, p.1): for instance, by seeking to make rural producers more ‘entrepreneurial’ by expanding their production of commodities for sale. Adverse incorporation by contrast highlights how this mainstream narrative and practice continues to overlook how disadvantage can flow not from people’s exclusion but rather their “inclusion on disadvantageous terms” (du Toit, 2009, p.1).

In Tunisia, this economistic residual perspective underpinned both IFI prescriptions in the decades leading up to the 2010/11 Revolution[[2]](#footnote-2) as well as the World Bank’s assessment of the causes of the Uprising and its prescriptions for change during the transition. According to the 2014 development policy review, published shortly after the Revolution and entitled ‘The Unfinished Revolution’, at the heart of the movement was the country’s “inadequate economic performance” that reflected failures to liberalise the economy more than it already had been. It was not, the Bank suggests,

*the ‘liberalization’ of the economy that brought unemployment and low-wage jobs to Tunisia […] Tunisia was unable to advance beyond the low-skill, low-wage economy because it did not in fact open up its economy (to domestic investors, as well as internationally) and did not change the underlying state-controlled economic model* (World Bank, 2014, p.5)*.*

Completing the ‘unfinished revolution’, the report argues, requires “creat[ing] an economic environment that facilitates a structural transformation of the economy by removing distortions and promoting competition […] To unleash private sector growth, the focus needs to be on promoting competition and removing barriers to ‘creative destruction’” (World Bank, 2014, p.20). Within this framework, the post-Revolution period has seen successive governments continue to implement structural adjustment policies and neoliberal reforms in exchange for IMF loans. These have targeted macro-economic stability and privatisation and have included cuts on social protection and subsidies on goods such as electricity and milk. In respect to the agriculture sphere and small farmers, which is the focus of this article, the emphasis has remained on boosting agriculture exports through forms of support to larger landowners and investors that has meant the shunting aside of small farmer interests in the rush “to secure the neoliberal status quo” (Ayeb and Bush, 2016, p.10). Post-Revolution agriculture policy is similarly set within IFI terms, which have emphasised the production of agriculture goods for export based on comparative advantage, reduction of input subsidies and state intervention in the market (World Bank, 2014; AfDB, 2012). In particular, the agriculture component of the national Strategic Development Plan (2016) emphasised a 5% growth target with the need to modernise agriculture and support agri-food industries and increase the share of food products in the country's exports. Impacts have included renewed emphasis on irrigated agriculture and the production of fruit and vegetables for processing and export, which favours large farms in the country’s coastal regions at the expense of small farms and cereal production, and a roll-back in input subsidies and other forms of support (Chebbi et al., 2019). For the IFIs, the new Tunisian state’s role in respect to agriculture would move towards sustaining a more limited regulatory framework “so the market for agricultural goods […] is not impeded by inefficient government intervention” (Ayeb, 2019, p.91). “Policy”, Ayeb (2019, p.91; also Hanieh, 2015) continues, remains “divorced from the welfare and well-being of small-scale farmers. The market is reified in the language of ‘unleashing the potential of agriculture to boost growth.”

## **Background and methodological approach**

This article applies the adverse incorporation frame to a farming community in the country’s Cap Bon region for understanding tensions and grievances arising in this community post-Revolution. In contrast to other regions, such as the country’s interior, Cap Bon is relatively wealthy. Situated on the country’s northeast coast, it epitomises development ‘success’ in Tunisian agriculture where, over the course of several decades, small farmers have become incorporated into an agri-food system based on high value products, contract farming, and production for export. Almost 70% of the population in the community and its immediate surroundings is involved in agriculture: small farms (<5ha) represent around 78% of total holdings; while, at the time of fieldwork, there were approximately 20 medium sized farms and 9 farms larger than 100ha. Production is based on different types of tenancy and sharecropping arrangements or owner-occupied production, while some farmers may combine owner-occupied and other tenancy arrangements. Farmworkers are hired on a daily and seasonal basis. Production consists of predictable and fast maturing cultures and a high dependency on chemical fertilisers, pesticides and modern seed varieties. Production is integrated into commodity chains that provision a number corporate agri-food processors, national supermarkets, and some foreign buyers. Informal production contracts between farmers and agri-food processors and other buyers are common. Seeds, seedlings and saplings and other inputs and equipment are acquired through informal credit agreements with several agri-input suppliers and nurseries affiliated with local agri-food processors. A small number of local stores also make seeds, agriculture equipment and treatments available through credit.

The approach involved combining an adverse incorporation frame and an interpretive analytical approach. Use of an interpretive component satisfies methodological requirements for work that seeks to understand peace through the ‘local’ and ‘everyday’ (e.g. Millar, 2016; MacGinty, 2021). The article draws on a number of data sources. First, it makes use of interview data collected in the framework of two studies, the first conducted in the community in Cap Bon in 2015-2016 and another in the same community in 2020-2021. The first study consisted of 42 semi-structured interviews with small farmers, sharecroppers and tenants in a community in Tunisia’s Cap Bon region. Most (40) had spent 20 years of more in farming livelihoods. The focus of these interviews was on research participants’ perspectives on their needs, priorities and livelihood challenges in the context of Tunisia’s political transition. This study’s methodological approach, including how the data was coded and analysed, is documented in detail elsewhere (Author). The second consisted of follow-up interviews in the same community that sought to test, refine and develop further the findings from the first study, and consisted of 2 focus groups with women and men farmers and 5 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including local activists and governance actors. Data was analysed thematically. Secondary material and statistical data were used to inform the investigation of local development and change trajectories. In particular, use has been made Sethom’s detailed study of agrarian change in Cap Bon and on his later work on urban and rural development in Tunisia and rural marginalisation (Sethom 1977a; 1977b; 1992; 1996), as well as empirical studies Alia Gana (2011; 2012; 2013), Elloumi (2013; 2015), Bellin (2002), Jouili (2008; 2009) and King (1999; 2003; 2009).

## **Findings**

There are four main findings which are summarised here and unpacked below. These are presented with two distinct but related phenomena in mind: farmers’ concrete experiences of disadvantage, tensions and grievances; and the underlying agrarian relations, structures and adverse terms underpinning these. Attention to both reflect the demand that a realist political economy distinguish between concrete experiences, ideas and views – the objects of interpretive enquiry – and the underlying structures and causal mechanisms they are associated with or which produce them.[[3]](#footnote-3) The historical treatment of relations, structures and adverse terms is essential for present purposes because of the way these emerge, consolidate and operate over longer term trajectories of development and change.

This article’s main findings are as follows. First, the local economy is an accumulation of present and longstanding issues and grievances for farmers in the community related to livelihood difficulties and insecurity. Several livelihood difficulties were identified by all categories of farmer during the study period: growing production costs and debt amidst meagre and diminishing returns; and the shouldering of production risk and other forms of uncertainty. Second, these difficulties reflect the adverse terms of farmers’ inclusion into the economy that are characterised by social relations of dependency and exploitation by more powerful economic actors in the community. Third, all categories of farmer attributed their difficulties to the behaviour of and their relationships with these more powerful actors which benefit from marketisation and which uphold farmers’ adverse terms of incorporation through informal contracts, debt, production quotas, sanction and the threat of legal action. In particular these are the corporate agri-input suppliers and agri-food processing industries in the region; but also the new Tunisian state which was seen as neglectful and no longer willing to directly support small farmers or to protect them from more powerful economic actors. And finally, Tunisia’s emerging democracy during the study period was experienced and appraised by participants through the lens of the rural economy: most participants had come to view the Revolution and the new Tunisian state in wholly negative terms, frequently expressing frustration with it and, on occasion, a nostalgia for the old order. In what follows, present the main findings of this article are presented, focusing first on the meanings made and then situating these in the local trajectory of development and change.

## ***Livelihood difficulties***

First, similar livelihood difficulties were identified by all categories of farmer across the study period 2015/16-2021, and which led participants to routinely describe agriculture as “just for living”. Production and associated incomes are seasonal, with net incomes often just about enough to get by on once debts to lenders are serviced but little more than that. Net losses threaten to push them under. Participants described low incomes, net losses and indebtedness as having the effect of depressing household consumption. In more serious cases, depression of household consumption may also affect food and nutrition of the family. There are risks and sanctions associated with the failure to repay seasonal debts on time, such as might happen when yields are low due to adverse weather conditions or when the pesticides that farmers depend on become unaffordable.[[4]](#footnote-4) Risks and sanctions include higher interest rates, more stringent lending conditions (such as the demand to return part of the output to the creditor) or the refusal by the creditor to lend in future – a sanction that is both economic andsocial. Worse, farmers may face court and imprisonment for failing to return what they owe – and though it is not common, there was a marked concern about this prospect.

Sources of livelihood uncertainty obtain at end-of-harvest selling and markets as well. More powerful economic actors may renege on informal production contracts or buy back the value amount of a seasonal output that covers only the debt amount but no more. A reflection of power inequalities between actors, this leaves farmers in a situation of needing to find a new market quickly, which is made more challenging due to the high perishability of the cultures grown in this region. In the community, livestock theft and fears for personal security was also reported to have grown since the Revolution. It was associated by participants, in the main, with youth unemployment in the region and a perceived decline in order since the 2010/11 Revolution. Some had chosen to abandon livestock entirely or had taken new measures to protect it, such as bringing sheep into their homes at night. Farmer priorities did not vary significantly between sharecropping, tenants and small landowners and fell majorly on addressing the growing fault line between poor farmers as a whole and agri-industrial actors in the community.

Overall, interviews revealed a shared sense of the conditions for agriculture as having deteriorated significantly over a 20-year trajectory, and since the Revolution especially. This is due in part to the national economic fallout in the post-2011 period, the effects of which have been felt for example on the rising costs for imported agriculture inputs on which the agri-industrial farming model depends. Farming livelihoods were perceived as satisfying little more than basic needs for food, shelter and so on. A perceived decline in the conditions for agriculture is associated with the reduction of state support for farmers, the loss of traditional local seeds, a growing dependency on industrial inputs (seeds, fertilisers and so on), neighbours becoming indebted and forced to sell up and leave, and fewer opportunities for social and economic advancement. The Revolution is most associated meanwhile with heightened exploitation by economic actors in the region and the rise of insecurity.

In what follows, these livelihood challenges are placed in historical perspective and in terms of the adverse terms of farmers’ inclusion into the local economy that comprises an agri-food system based on high value products, contract farming, and production for export.

## ***Adverse terms in historical perspective***

The terms of farmers’ inclusion have become consolidated over a local development trajectory characterised by the shift away from subsistence agriculture in the mid-twentieth century towards an agrarian capitalist economy. This trajectory is marked by several key developments: the shift to state-driven capitalist expansion after Independence and by contemporary forms of agricultural restructuring within a wider economic liberalisation drive that began in the 1970s. This drive has been amplified over the first 10 years of the transition.

During the colonial period, the land on which the community presently resides had garnered little interest from Europeans and remained sparsely populated by Bedouin groups engaged in subsistence agriculture. It remained largely isolated until after the Second World War, when wealthy inhabitants from nearby towns began investing in the area as part of a larger ‘market gardening revolution’ that saw peasant farmers in the region switch from extensive, subsistence farming to intensive irrigated agriculture in response to a growing domestic market (Sethom 1977a; 1977b; 1992). Landowners based in the towns began expanding their enterprises by buying more land in the community at low prices from bedouin groups, eventually gaining ownership rights over about a quarter of all agricultural land there. Sharecroppers and landless workers that were becoming incorporated into more capitalistic forms of production in the area were those who had managed to exit the khammesat system,[[5]](#footnote-5) but who lacked land, machines and draft animals for intensive farming.

This shift from production for subsistence to production for market intensified after Independence in 1956, when the state committed to a programme ‘agricultural modernisation’. Like other newly independent states, its aim was to drive industrialisation by enhancing agricultural production and increasing productivity through technical improvements. Private sector forces were initially intended to lead this, but their slowness gave way to a more state-centred approach. Here, intervention in agriculture accelerated the shift to more capitalistic forms of production by means of several mechanisms: 1) the dissolution of large habous[[6]](#footnote-6) landholdings, viewed by Cap Bon’s agrarian elite as archaic and an obstacle to agriculture intensification and development; state incentives for the installation of agri-food processing facilities in the northern and coastal regions (Bellin, 2002); and direct and indirect state support to farmers, such as access to state credit and making farming equipment and inputs available at reduced prices or free of charge, such as motor pumps and fertilisers. Medium term credit for larger investments, such as for digging wells and purchasing pumps, was provided by the National Bank of Tunisia (BNT) while special credit unions set up after 1964 provided short term seasonal credit with low interest rates for purchasing farming inputs (Sethom 1977b). These credit unions were part of the agricultural service cooperatives which were a set of state managed enterprises established by compelling farmers to collectivise their land and production (Perkins, 2014). Though the cooperatives project was abandoned in 1969 following widespread opposition by farmers,[[7]](#footnote-7) the spread of the service cooperatives and credit unions had contributed significantly to the growth of gardening cultures in the community: a boom in tomato production led by small and medium farmers, was made possible by “the distribution of fertilisers and treatments, sold by the cooperative centres in the remotest corners of the peninsular and bought largely thanks to credit given by the credit unions to the majority of farmers” (Sethom, 1977b, p.184).

The abandonment of the cooperative project occurred within a broader effort at liberalisation across economic sectors and a repositioning of the country’s economy into the international division of labour based on low salaries (King, 2003; Elloumi, 2006; Bellin, 2002). In Cap Bon, the service cooperatives and credit unions began shutting down, and those that remained saw their activities reduced. The monopolies held by the service cooperatives were lifted after 1969 and private sector forces were left to fill the gaps, notably in input and credit provision and marketing channels. State withdrawal meant poor farmers falling under the thumb of private traders, shop keepers and lenders: farmers bemoaned the problems accessing credit and land as factors which underpinned “the proletarianisation and exodus of a good part of the landless and small farmers” on the peninsula towards the cities (Sethom, 1977b, p.187).

The new credit organisations set up in this context as alternatives to existing credit unions had limited reach, however. Nationwide, only about 20% of farmers benefited (Sethom, 1992). In the market gardening regions, the high costs of irrigated agriculture meant that seasonal credit would cover only between 10-20% of expenses, though farmers there did benefit later on from state subsidies on imported agricultural inputs (Jouili, 2008; Sethom 1977b). While state intervention in agriculture diminished, it continued to stimulate domestic and foreign investment in industry with the introduction in 1972 and 1974 of two new investment codes that offered generous fiscal incentives for would-be investors (Bellin, 2002). Agriculture industries were set up in the market gardening regions of Cap Bon and elsewhere, and a growing number of urban-based private traders began to gain control over and profit from the flow of agriculture goods and commerce (Sethom 1992). In the community, several new agri-food processing industries were established in the 1970s for processing tomatoes and chili peppers.

Through agricultural restructuring, which began with the signing of an Agricultural Structural Adjustment Plan in 1987 and carried on through the 1990s and 2000s, the country saw a heightened commoditisation of agricultural production that favoured large-scale agriculture and cash crops to the detriment of small farmers. It also led to the emergence of new economic actors exercising control over rural production, such as agricultural entrepreneurs, industrialists, bankers, machine owners and traders (Gana, 2012; King 1999; 2003). A policy of agricultural prices was integrated into a reorientation of the economy toward “a regime of accumulation driven by exports based on increased mobilisation of static comparative advantage and market regulation” (Bedoui, 2004, cited in Jouili, 2008, p.190): subsidy elimination would rationalise resources and improve farmers’ incomes, while the alignment of domestic prices to world prices would orient production according to comparative advantage.

For farmers, this meant that the local economy they had become incorporated into became a site of stagnation in state investment and limited access to agricultural finance (FAO, 2013). Small farmers became increasingly dependent on their “own resources”, which likely includes a “significant volume of [informal] supplier and purchaser credit” (World Bank, 2012, p.1). Access to formal finance declined according to Ministry of Agriculture figures, from 9.3% between 1990-1994 to 6.3% between 1999 and 2004 (Jouili, 2009; 2008). More recently, a study by the World Bank (2012) shortly after the 2011 Revolution found that only about 7 percent of farmers benefit from formal agricultural finance, and that these make up just 11% of investment, with the remaining investment made up from farmers’ “own resources” (World Bank, 2012, p.1). In addition, seasonal credit from the BNA (in practice the only avenue for farmers to access finance) is almost completely limited to cereal production. Other crops have not received seasonal loans since at least 2004. In addition, the report notes that the banks in Tunisia have strategically moved away from lending to smallholders in favour of large-scale farms: “commercial banks are prepared to serve their well-known clients, whether in agriculture or other sectors, but do not have any culture or tradition of serving smallholders” (World Bank, 2012, p.2).

In a pattern that has intensified since the 2010/11 Revolution, the deepening commodification of agriculture that these processes of liberalisation and restructuring unleashed has seen expansion of the trade in industrial inputs (seeds, chemical fertilisers, pesticides and treatments) and the appearance of new equipment, varieties and products in the community and more generally. State incentives to traders encouraged the growth of trade in imported hybrid seeds, and farmers everywhere were encouraged to switch from Tunisian seeds to high-yielding varieties. Privately owned agri-food processors have also switched to distributing and processing hybrid varieties. The trade has also expanded to include new types of imported pesticides and other treatments that work with these hybrid seeds, as well as productivity enhancing equipment such as drip irrigation. Alongside, the withdrawal of the state in the context of liberalisation and restructuring was replaced by a new emphasis on the role of private associations and groups to fill the gaps in resource management, administration of production, product marketing, research, and extension and training.

These longer running processes of liberalisation and restructuring unfolded in Tunisia’s post-Independence era without any parallel opening up of civic space. As such, the region - like elsewhere in Tunisia - has been characterised by a legacy of restricted civic space and few or no opportunities for formal political participation during the authoritarian period. Independent organisations and other forms of representation were off limits to people with rural-based livelihoods while UTAP, the only major farmers’ association in the country, continued to function as a relay of political power and did not genuinely represent the interests of poor farmers (King, 2003; Gana, 2011; Ayeb and Bush, 2016). Gana (2011) observes that rising tensions around land and other resources in Tunisia accompanied liberalisation and state withdrawal over the course of the 2000s, but that it remained largely bottled up in the absence of mechanisms for conveying demands to policymakers. Rural associations such as for the management of water and pasture were unfurled in the 1980s and 1990s as mechanisms for local participation and development,[[8]](#footnote-8) but these were captured by more powerful economic actors at the local level and used by the state for supervising local populations (Canesse, 2014). Studies as late as 2010 identified growing conflicts around land and water that were associated with weak user associations and resource capture by more influential local actors (Gana, 2013).

Findings on farmer priorities in this study are revealing in this regard: alongside state regulation, enforcement and price controls, there was an identified need among participants to develop new forms of independent representation or channels for communicating needs, priorities and concerns. This was expressed in terms of a desire for a genuinely independent farmers’ organisation or trade union, the value of which was viewed in terms of enhanced representation that could also strengthen their power vis-à-vis more powerful economic actors, such as their capacities to negotiate.

## ***Economic actors and the state: exploitation and instrumentalisation***

Tensions and grievances identified in the study take place against this background and pertain to farmers’ relations with more powerful economic actors, in particular the owners of agri-input businesses and agri-food processors who they view as exploitative and as instrumentalising them. A common refrain during fieldwork was that farmers in the region are “working for others”, which denoted the feeling that there had been a gradual transfer of farmers’ control over labour, resources and decision-making to agri-industrial actors and interests that had intensified considerably since the Revolution. Exploitation and instrumentalisation is associated with diminished incomes and this loss or transfer of control over their work and the way resources and services are exchanged:

*We have four powerful men who dominate all farmers* [in the community]*. They own the* [seed] *nurseries, the treatment companies, and brought nurseries* [to the area]*. The financing of farmers by those men is based on credit and blank cheques, and they don’t care about* [us] *because they know they’ll be paid in the end […] now the private sector is dominating everything. This is what is affecting farmers in a bad way.*

These more powerful economic actors exercise control over which crop varieties are grown,[[9]](#footnote-9) when and how repayments are made or the produce traded; they may renege on the terms of informal contracts, such as by refusing to buy back more than the debt amount or by only agreeing to buy back more at rock bottom prices; and by farmers’ full exposure to production risks and costs in the absence of crop insurance. According to another participant,

*Honestly, [*agriculture has had no value*] for many years. The exploitation by the suppliers and the owners of the cooling stores and the factories; they are colonising us. They are colonising farmers. Look, you plant it and you take care of it then you take it with your own hands to them. And they are earning as much as they want*.

Some participants used terms like “exploitation” to describe their relationships with these actors. Especial criticism is reserved for state authorities who are perceived as neglectful for not regulating relations between farmers and other actors and for not providing any visible and direct support to farmers, such as inputs or access to crop insurance. On matters of direct state support, farmers reported a decline over many years in access to state services and benefits from the local department of agriculture. Though the withdrawal of services and benefits and the perceived inactivity and unresponsiveness of the state in the community predates the Revolution, participants identified a further decline since 2011 and a perception that the state in general had become an empty shell. At the time of fieldwork, what participants reported receiving at most was information about plant diseases. In addition, the department had recently distributed a few bags of treatment to potato growers for the purpose of storage. This was identified as the only resource of any value received from the department, and a limited one at that – though farmers with livestock also benefit from subsidised feed. The following responses were typical in their highlighting of state priorities for agribusiness at the expense of small farmers:

*The state had a choice between encouraging farmers or investors. It chose to support investors. It’s a whole system. They created that system for arriving at this point. This strategy makes farmers dependent. Farmers apply the orders without thinking. They don’t have the right to make decisions.*

And according to two others,

Chiheb:[The state] *is only interested in the owners of capital* [businesspersons]*.*

Walid: *They need the owners of capital. Even hakum[[10]](#footnote-10) needs them. They support them and not me. They* [hakum] *say it is better to support someone who can employ 100 people in 3 shifts* [morning, afternoon and night]*. But this is nothing.* [The wealthy] *are buying land and building houses and sleeping under the air conditioner. And the one who is sweating has nothing at end* […] [Hakum] *is acting like the devil towards farmers.*

During the study period, the post-Revolution period had come to be associated with heightened exploitation and further deterioration of the conditions for farming livelihoods, including diminished personal security. For participants, the new state shared with the old regime a perception that it is distant, neglectful and unresponsive to people’s needs. While freedom of expression was identified as the only positive outcome of the Revolution, participants did not see this as particularly relevant to their livelihoods given the continuing absence of venues through which they could bargain, negotiate and be listened to in matters concerning their farming livelihoods.On occasion these views gave way to a nostalgia for the previous authoritarian order. A tenant farmer, speaking in 2015, spoke plainly:

*We hope that Ben Ali comes back, we want Ben Ali and the ruling of Ben Ali, and the system of Ben Ali. …for us, the minority and the poor people, we didn’t get any benefits* [from the Revolution]*. The only other outcome* [of the Revolution] *is* [us] *being punished. We didn’t benefit from this Revolution. We are being suffocated even more. To speak about freedom and the freedom of citizens… there is no freedom!*

## **Discussion**

For all intents and purposes, Cap Bon is a development ‘success story’ in Tunisia. In contrast to much of the rest of the country, and in particular the country’s poorer interior region, small farmers have become incorporated into an agri-food system based on high value products, contract farming, and production for export. Indeed, such is the success of Tunisia’s coastal regions that these regions have featured less prominently in public discussion and debate on regional development in the country. Attention has focused on the interior regions and the need to address regional development disparities. Policy has followed suit, with the agriculture component in the country’s national development strategy for instance prioritising, for the interior regions, a shift towards high-value products and new forms of public and private support for agri-food processing industries (Chebbi et al., 2019).

Yet these findings from a community in Cap Bon suggests a more complex picture on the ground of power relations evolving across a transition trajectory (Lai, 2024; Distler et al., 2018). Here, there are tensions and grievances rooted in the dynamics of continued livelihood difficulties since the Revolution which reflect the intersection of renewed marketisation at the macro level with existing local development trajectories. The way marketisation touches down locally is seen in the consolidation rather than the transformation of this development trajectory, where the adverse terms of incorporation remain characterised by exploitative social relations and dependency in a context of increased state neglect. Alongside, the few if any legacies of genuinely independent representation for farmers in the community may be suggested to form part of the social and cultural picture of these adverse terms: where farmer unions and organisations elsewhere have been successful in transforming vertical relations between farmers and agri-industrial actors into more horizontal and associational ones, this is yet to happen in the region. Nevertheless, the need for new forms of political representation for this community of now ageing farmers was identified by participants as a priority.

This picture is striking in that it foregrounds a structural situation of farmers finding themselves with ‘too much’ rather than ‘not enough’ market. Indeed, the focus of farmer priorities had little or nothing to do with embedding themselves and their production more deeply into the rural economy in the post-Revolution period but were all attuned to redressing to some extent the adverse terms by which they are already incorporated into it. These priorities were specific and concerned to reconfigure power relations between farmers and agri-industrial actors in ways that are more equitable. Taken together, they militate against a blueprint or template approach in international development in favour of one that redresses adverse terms (Hickey and du Toit, 2013) and prefigure a picture of peace- and statebuilding where the “interfaces of external and local interests would potentially demonstrate a greater concern for the welfare of everyday life” (Pugh, 2010, p.275).

Stepping back, the study provides yet more evidence of how marketisation can be negatively experienced in a transition setting (Millar, 2016; Vogel, 2022) and in a local development setting where we might not expect to see this. Application of an adverse incorporation frame provides a means of understanding and explaining such experiences in terms of the subtle processes of continuity and change in the social relations that characterise a group or community’s incorporation into the agrarian economy (Lai, 2024). What is offered here is a set of tools that can be harnessed in further efforts to close the gap identified by Vogel (2022, p.993) that “we know little about how these economic reforms and policies – often despite positive growth rates – impact on conflict dynamics, pre-existing inequalities, the legitimacy of the state and how they intersect with other parts of the peacebuilding agenda on the local level.” The historical perspective adopted here, arguably missing from such analyses (Vogel, 2022), allows us to further see how marketisation can also be part of the context or conditions in which new processes of marketisation unfold and that practitioners need to be aware of. There are some important implications for work on the local economies of peace and discussions of the liberal peace as it relates to the development sphere more generally.

First, this approach provides a new means of specifying the quality of marketisation processes in a transitional and post-conflict setting in terms of a) people’s livelihoods and security and b) whether and how far such processes redress or accentuate historically adverse terms and their impacts or leave them unchanged at the local level. For peace research, the question turns from whether or not populations are excluded from development and markets and exposed to barriers to access; to *how* they are already incorporated into them and what the terms of that incorporation are. An appraisal along these lines allows us to distinguish between marketisation processes associated with more adverse or less adverse terms for marginalised groups, and how tensions and grievances might map on to these terms or be alleviated by them.

At the same time, the approach may help elucidate and situate tensions and grievances in terms of economic actors’ resistance to improved terms that might benefit marginalised groups. Such actors may include domestic capital and old and new corporate actors with “an interest in minimising wages and limiting union activity” (Selby, 2008, p.24; Pugh 2005), but could also include farmers of different sizes and middlemen, such as transporters, who could come to identify new opportunities in the transition setting. The different stakes such actors have in a marketisation process may reflect their changing fortunes in this setting, where the changing terms of incorporation shape, enable and constrain the capacities of different groups to accumulate. Such processes of differentiation may be manifested, concretely, in new and changing patterns of inequality and dispossession locally and treated within key questions of the political economy of agrarian change in peacetime: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with it? (Bernstein, 2010). For practitioners, it demands attention to the impact of marketisation on the subtle dynamics according to which ‘winners and losers’ are created in the local economy, and the economic opportunities and incentives that may emerge and become crystalised into relatively enduring social positions and identity categories (Verwimp, 2005; 2013; Uvin, 2010). In this regard, the approach helps elucidate those endogenous actors and drivers of marketisation, providing in turn one response to Heathershaw’s (2013, p.275; also Lemay-Hebert and Murshed, 2016) challenge to scholars that they develop “sharper theoretical tools to understand and explain the complex cases that are thrown up by the liberal peace.”

We can also appreciate how marginalised actors may themselves be key constituents in such processes. In this respect, the findings lend some support to Tschunkert’s (2024, p.3) notion of ‘obliged tolerance’ that explains the failure of sustainable and positive peace economies to emerge where marginalised actors have come to tolerate more powerful economic “others not wholly out of free will but also due to a perceived lack of choice, often driven by power dynamics rooted in the local political economy.” We also see marginalised actors as key constituents in terms of how their priorities around less adverse terms may leave the overall direction of local development and change trajectories unchallenged. A question remains about how far action on farmer priorities identified in this study would redress adverse terms in a meaningful way given how these priorities presuppose farmers’ continued dependence on imported chemical inputs and seeds, and irrigated, water-intensive cultures. Looking further ahead, the viability of the industrial agriculture model in the community over the longer term is questionable given growing water access constraints in the region and environmental degradation (rising salinity) and future climate impacts (Mekki, 2017). Agroecological and more ‘diversified farming systems’ oriented toward sustainable technologies and practices, biodiversity, and more direct relations with consumers (Kremen et al., 2012) remained, by contrast, outside of the community’s imaginary.

Finally, there is value in testing the adverse incorporation frame in settings characterised by legacies of physical violence, where violence (or the threat of violence) has been employed as a means for imposing and maintaining models of development that marginalise and dispossess populations and groups (Thomson, 2011). While the focus of this study has been on the social and economic mechanisms that buttress political and economic power in a transition setting and the civil peace, the intersecting of such processes with physical violence adds a further component: that is, that this intersection may have facilitated historical changes in adverse terms and, in turn, has come to inform how communities appraise their victimhood and define justice and reparation. For example, the focus on property restitution as a form of redress in land issues (Sánchez, 2021) appears overly narrow and limited once we take into account the wider web of social relations into which land and property are embedded, both in conflict and peacetime (Gready et al., 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to offer a contribution to emerging work on the local economic turn, which it has done through a novel application of an ‘adverse incorporation’ frame derived from critical development studies. It has sought to show how local tensions and grievances associated with marketisation can be set within longer running trajectories of development and change that may have preceded the transition or conflict; and it has sought to explain tensions and grievances in social relational terms. We see in turn how, in a period of transition, participants and those in the community struggle to locate their challenges squarely in the past. In fact, the past reappears in a new guise by way of a consolidating rather than transformation of the community’s historical development trajectory (Distler et al., 2018). Underneath the portrait of a relatively well developed and wealthy region are local tensions and grievances that reflect community exposure to ‘too much’ market and a strengthening and consolidation of existing distributions of economic power. As also revealed in the study, the new state at the time of fieldwork shared with the old regime the perception of being distant, neglectful and unresponsive; a view that was occasionally accompanied by nostalgia for the previous authoritarian order and consonant, perhaps, with Tunisia’s current populist trajectory that reflects in large part the “incapacity of the country’s post-2011 political elites to effectively address regional socioeconomic grievances” (Meddeb, 2020, p.4). Further application of the adverse incorporation frame is suggested as means of specifying the quality of marketisation processes, for understanding the different stakes and interests of local economic actors across development trajectories, and for examining the historical intersection of physical violence and adverse terms and implications for peacebuilding practice.

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1. Most pertinently perhaps, progress made on democratic reform between 2011-2021 is being systematically undone following the election of President Kais Saied in 2019. Coming to power on a populist programme amidst brewing discontent - driven in large part by dashed expectations for improvements in living standards (Koehler, 2023) - democratisation has been put into reverse with attacks on political opponents and the legislature and judiciary, and the adoption in 2022 of a new constitution consolidating presidential power (Khaddar, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As others (e.g. Pfeifer, 2016, p.22) have noted, Tunisia (and Egypt) were “vaunted stars of neoliberal reform in the Arab world from the 1990s through 2010. They were praised for the policy changes they undertook under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (the international financial institutions, or IFIs), aid agencies such as USAID, and the European Union’s Mediterranean Partnership Agreements. Following standard “Washington Consensus” advice, IMF-supervised stabilization programs supported monetary policy that reined in the money supply, raised interest rates toward international market levels, and curbed inflation. Structural adjustment programs supervised by the World Bank and other Western agencies supported shrinking of the financial, regulatory, and productive roles of the state in the economy, reduction of public spending, liberalization of international trade and investment, and privatization of publicly owned enterprises and public services. With little concern for political autocracy and repression, the IFIs heaped praise on the acceleration of privatization in the 2000s, the growth of exports, especially manufactured exports, overall economic growth, and a sharp rise in foreign direct investment, as seen for example in IMF consultation reports from the last boom year before the financial crisis struck” (Pfeifer, 2016, p.22). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On this view, the latter is not reducible to the former - although interpretive enquiry is essential for getting at underlying structures and mechanisms (Sayer, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that few if any small farmers have access to crop insurance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This had been a feudal structure in North African societies where landless peasant farmers were paid a fifth of the harvest in exchange for their labour. The remaining parts (draft, seeds, water and land) was provided by landowners. The system was formally codified in 1874 in the context of increasing commercialisation and export of grain as an attempt to bind the peasant to the landowner. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. i.e. held by religious organisations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The cooperative experiment was abandoned in September 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These were intended to fill the gaps left by the state’s withdrawal from resource management, administration of production, product marketing, research, and extension and training. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As one participant protested, “And when you talk to the [seed] supplier, does he understand you? He doesn’t! He says ‘you want hetma [seed] potatoes’ and [he] brings ‘hetma’ potatoes to you. I don’t know what they are, these ‘hetma’ potatoes!” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Hakum’ refers to either the government or the police. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)