



IFES Tunisia: Technological Innovation at the Service of Youth Engagement

Overview

Tunisian youth played a leading role in the protests that led to the overthrow of former President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. Despite this, many young Tunisians are frustrated by their continued political and socio-economic marginalization during the democratic transition. They lack trust in state institutions to solve their problems, feel alienated from the current democratic transition, and mistrust political parties that seem disconnected from their day-to-day concerns. Post-revolution democratic institutions seem unable to meet the expectations and respond to the concerns of young people. As a result, Tunisian youth have become increasingly disillusioned with political processes and disengaged from elections.

To address this growing lack of civic engagement, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Tunisia launched an original initiative called [Hack4Democracy](#) (H4D), a combination of democracy camps and hackathons, putting the latest technological advances at the service of youth engagement. H4D promotes civic engagement through the competitive creation of innovative tools using new technologies, and builds professional competencies for youth by providing networking opportunities, mentoring and incubation of the most promising projects. Importantly, H4D is a bridge between democracy promotion work and social entrepreneurship as it seeks to encourage youth to create their own civically oriented jobs. Selim Belghith, an H4D participant from Djerba, stated, “Initially our goal was to have an application that will win, but during the project we ended up with a start-up project and we started to think about sustainability.”

197 Youth, 24 Regions, 50 Democracy Innovation Projects

The H4D camps are intensive four-day events where Tunisians aged 18 to 30 from across the country come together to design high and low-tech democracy service projects. IFES held six regional camps, each providing an opportunity for debate, dialogue and competition among young people to reflect on citizenship, decentralization, democracy and elections. H4D participants came to the camps to gain direct experience in critical soft skills such as leadership, stress management, public speaking, coordination and time management, rather than listen to lectures on these topics. At the same time, participants were challenged to develop useful, practical and innovative solutions to support youth civic engagement. This combination was a powerful civic education tool for youth as it provided in-depth exposure to the principles of democratic governance and civic rights and responsibilities in a fun environment, while creating new tools for engagement. H4D participant Nourhene Msekni, from Mahdia, commented, “The H4D paved the way for us to open up into other fields and to become more interested in governance, elections and local affairs.

IFES supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral systems and builds local capacity to promote sustainable democracy.

To learn more about H4D and hear from participants, please click [here](#) and [here](#) for videos.



At first, H4D was only a great opportunity that knocked the door, but then it becomes an awesome community of civic hackers.”

IFES held the camps throughout Tunisia to ensure that young people from every region, including the marginalized interior regions, could participate. Overall, 197 youth coming from 22 regions of Tunisia participated in six regional H4D camps and proposed [50 democracy innovation projects](#). Participants not only had to develop a compelling project in less than 48 hours, but they also had to pitch it in front of high-level jury members who were seasoned professionals drawn from the private and public sectors. To rise to the challenge, H4D participants were mentored by four experienced coaches. Several of the camps’ winning projects went on to receive funding to produce their applications, either from IFES or from other international organizations. These projects included the creation of a chatbot to answer youth’s questions about voter registration and a game called “Run4Democracy,” which was nominated for best national digital solution in Tunisia for the International World Summit Awards. The High Independent Authority for Elections shared the game on its social media accounts and it was downloaded more than 10,000 times.

The H4D camps attracted the attention of national government agencies, who expressed support for and commitment to the high-impact activity. During a ceremony at the Tunisian Ministry of Information Technologies and Digital Economy organized in honor of the three winning teams of the first H4D camp, Secretary of State Habib Dababi said, “We are here to encourage you. We are here to support you. The ministry will always be available for this type of initiative because we believe in it!”

H4D National Finale in Tunis

To crown the H4D regional camps, IFES organized a national finale in Tunis during which the six winning teams competed against each other to determine the ultimate winner of the H4D. During the finale, each team had 48 hours to refine and further develop their solution. For the second time, they presented their projects to a high-level multidisciplinary jury made up of eminent members of the business world, political life, government, the media and civil society.

Several prominent national and international government officials attended the event to praise the efforts of participating youth. At the opening ceremony, U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia H.E. Daniel Rubinstein remarked, “Your innovative ideas for spreading a culture of social participation among young people are impressive and commendable.” H.E. Rita Adam, the Swiss Ambassador to Tunisia added, “When I see you today gathered, it warms my heart, because, indeed, you young people, you are the future of your country, you have the desire to work with you and take your destiny in hand.”

IFES provides the top three winning teams of the national finale with mentors to further develop their cutting-edge proposals into viable projects with the aim of creating start-ups that can generate revenue. The goal is to guide each team in creating a legal entity to host their projects, developing a detailed business plan and realistically budgeting their costs. The teams are working toward the development of a minimum viable product that would serve to raise additional funds to move from production to commercialization of their products and hence generate revenue.

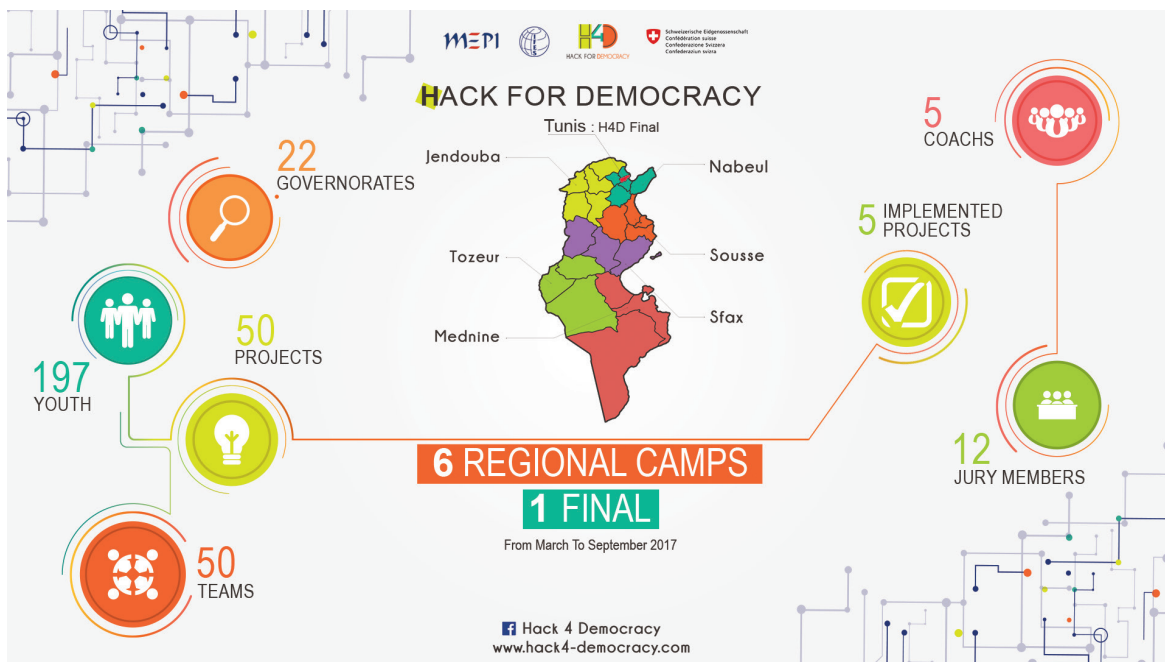
The winning team of the H4D national finale, from Monastir, created a project called Bikom Likom (from you to you), which consists of a tactile screen and application that will be installed in municipalities to provide them with citizen feedback on public service delivery and priorities. The team is in discussions with the municipality’s head of Jammel (Monsastir) to pilot-test the product once it is developed. The runner-up at the national finale, a team from Mednine, created an application called VOTEK (your vote), an online voting system that has the potential for use by universities, professional boards, civic organizations and trade unions to elect their representatives. Cynapsis, a leading French IT company, agreed to provide pro-bono technical assistance to the team in the development of their platform. The third-place team developed the project Polit’Agora (Political Agora), which uses data mining to develop an algorithm to objectively analyze political discourse and electoral platforms to help voters make informed choices.

An Impactful and Effective Civic Engagement Tool

H4D camps helped participating Tunisian youth gain self-confidence, discover their potential and raise their awareness of the importance of civic engagement. The camps not only allowed them to express their creativity, but also gave them the opportunity to become active citizens and actors of change in their communities. H.E. Rita Adam encapsulated this shared feeling well, noting, “You have an entrepreneurial spirit and innovative ideas. Do not give up, continue your dream, continue your projects.”

The H4D camps also provided networking opportunities for promising young professionals as they gained advice and inspiration from thought leaders on their quest to become successful social entrepreneurs. Participants formed an H4D community, sharing experiences and support through the various modes of social media. Always connected through the H4D Facebook group, they continued to share opportunities, inviting each other to events and trainings and congratulating each other on their mutual achievements. “We will continue to mobilize our networks to promote our project because Tunisia needs its youngsters, hopefully through future editions [of H4D]. Since 2011, youth has shown a growing lack of interest when it comes to public and political life, which is particularly disturbing,” said Malik, one of the members of the H4D camp community and an enthusiastic user of the H4D Facebook page. IFES is committed to nurture this high potential network by selecting some of the most active H4D alumni to turn them into H4D change makers.

Following the completion of the H4D finale, IFES held focus group discussions with participants to gauge the impact of the program. An impressive 77 percent responded that the H4D camps contributed to fostering their engagement in their communities and a striking 83 percent of the participants believed they could share the skills and knowledge they learned during camps with their peers or reinvest them to benefit their local communities. Additionally, attitudinal and behavioral change were noticeable in terms of increased civic engagement. A few H4D participants became involved in civil society organizations as a result of their participation in IFES activities, with several being elected to executive management or board positions. Three H4D participants also joined together to create an association in Kasserine called Jeunes Actif (Active Youth) in February 2018, which encourages youth activism. These results underline the impact of the H4D experience on youth and the potential it has for youth local engagement.



For more on IFES Tunisia, please visit <http://www.ifes.org/tunisia>.

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