

Self-Governance

Collective Resource Management in Jemna and Awlad Jaballah

André Weißenfels

EL-MECHRI: 'Raising cattle in this region used to be profitable. It provided [the farmers] with a decent living wage. Recently, the profits decreased, but they held on to cattle-raising and to their lands. What they defended was their way of making a living. Cattle-raising is how they pay their bills, their children's education, etc. This is how they make a living. They revolted because that was taken away from them.'

Interview with El-Mechri (2021)

Two agricultural communities in Tunisia, Jemna and Ouled Jaballah, have taken action against long lasting marginalization and exploitation through centralized authorities; namely, the French colonial administration and later the postcolonial Tunisian nation state. After the revolution in 2011 they have engaged in collective management of their local resources, while practicing and experimenting – at least in part – with self-governance. The two cases show features of 'commoning' (Bollier/Helfrich 2015) and employ anarchist practices (Bamyeh 2009) manifesting in their tendency towards direct participation, consensus decision-making and voluntary compliance with those decisions. In this explorative chapter I aim to show that such movements exist in Tunisia, and with them the lived possibilities for participatory self-governance and collective resource management as an alternative to a state-centred governance structure. My analysis is based on literature research as well as on semi-structured interviews with spokespeople of both movements in October 2021 in Jemna, and in November 2021 in Monastir. This empirical basis does not allow me to draw final conclusions, instead it represents a starting point for more detailed research, interpretation, and further theorization. There also exists a considerable gap between the information available about the famous and widely published case of Jemna and the more recent and barely known case of Ouled Jaballah. Both movements are still in the making, I thus do not aim to finally assess the role they play in post-revolutionary and post-coup Tunisia, but to open up a perspective.

Jemna: On January 12th 2011, two days before the resignation of then president Ben Ali, a group of rioting young men occupied a date farm in Jemna, an oasis in the governorate of Kebili in South Tunisia (Kerrou 2021). The land on which the farm stands, the men felt, belonged to them. It had been taken from them first by the French colonizers and later by the post-colonial Tunisian nation state. During the protests a nearby station of the national guard was burned down. The mobilization around the occupation of the farm led to public discussions in the oasis and while some wanted to divide the land among different families, a public gathering of men ultimately decided to keep the farm intact, its territory undivided and to manage it through a collective body. For this purpose, they decided to establish a committee – *Comité de Protection de la Revolution* – which, among other tasks, was responsible for the management of the farm. The committee consisted of representatives of the different districts of the town and worked, according to the people involved, without hierarchies and offices (Kerrou 2021: 49, 83, 115). When the committee was dissolved after the Tunisian elections for the constituent assembly in October 2011 (Etahri 2021, interview), the Association for the Protection of the Oasis was created in March 2012 in order to assume the management of the farm. This association is a registered body with an official management board. The latter was first established by a consensual decision among the men of Jemna (Kerrou 2021: 112) and later elected through a ballot vote (Etahri 2021, interview). Even though the current association is more hierarchically structured than the committee used to be, the management of the farm continues to be a public issue in Jemna and contains important elements of consensual decision-making. All decisions concerning the use of profits from the farm and the handling of conflicts with the state are taken collectively in a public space (Etahri 2021, interview). This collective management of the date farm has, so far, yielded impressive results. Profits improved massively and they have been partially reinvested in the local infrastructure: in a roofed market place, a football court, also in renovations and expansions of primary schools. Notwithstanding an ongoing conflict with the state authorities over the occupation of the land, the association has become the legitimate representative of the movements' interests in the negotiation with state authorities: the Ministry of Public Domains and the Ministry of Agriculture. So far, however, no legal solution has been agreed on.

Ouled Jaballah: On January 10th 2021, dairy farmers and activists in the village of Ouled Jaballah, located in the governorate of Mahdia held a sit-in at a roundabout in the centre of the village. They were protesting the rising fodder prices that pushed many small farmers out of business. While the state had fixed the price of milk, three big enterprises held a monopoly on the fodder and raised the farmers' costs of production, which effectively made small scale farming unprofitable. As a reaction, the farmers had blocked the nearby road between Jebeniana and Ksour Essaf. They had stopped and hijacked the trucks from the fodder companies that were profiting from their misery. That afternoon, 24 police cars from Mahdia arrived to reoccupy the trucks that had been highjacked. This resulted in a massive violent clash in which many of the roughly 5,000 people living in the village fought with the police and forced them to withdraw. Over the next few days, the protestors clashed repeatedly with the police, who returned regularly to reclaim the trucks (sometimes successfully, sometimes not), while the protestors continued to stop and confiscate new ones (El-Mechri 2021, interview). On February 13th, the protestors formed a committee to coordinate and

represent their movement. This committee – Coordination of Small Farmers – started negotiating with the governor of Mahdia and the regional council about reforms that should be implemented in order to end the protests. The negotiations resulted in a reduction of the soy price and put an end to the monopoly practices of the big fodder companies. Meanwhile, the news of the protests in Ouled Jaballah spread and farmers in other villages in the region also started organizing and voicing their opposition to the functioning of the fodder market (El-Mechri 2021, interview). During the sit-ins the activists and dairy farmers in Ouled Jaballah decided to found a cooperative in order to cut out mediators who skim off profits from the transport of fodder and milk and take a big margin away from the farmers. A group of protesters organized the necessary legal procedures and in July 2021 the governing body of the cooperative was being elected through ballots. At the time of my research, in late 2021, the cooperative had written its statute and almost every farmer in Ouled Jaballah had signed up to contribute money to establish the cooperative's basic capital.

The two cases of Jemna and Ouled Jaballah, I argue, represent examples of anarchist practices and commoning patterns. They connect joint resource management with practices of self-governance. As such, they continue to raise the same questions that were important drivers of the 2011 revolution: who in Tunisia has access to local resources, and who holds the authority to decide about access to land and the use of resources? Thus, Jemna and Ouled Jaballah show that inequality is always multidimensional and should be understood as unequal access not only to material resources, but also to decision-making processes and collective world making. Before I compare and discuss different aspects of both movements, I want to highlight that, as will become clear later, in the two cases the relationship between men and women inside the movements is very asymmetrical. Speaking for others in public, as well as the actual 'formal' leadership of both movements has so far been reserved for men. Another asymmetry concerns labour and pay beyond the gender level, for example, inequalities between members of the community and seasonal workers. The point is therefore not to show that all forms of exploitation have been abolished, but rather that the creation of equal opportunities involves an ongoing process of negotiation.

Social Movements in the Context of Historical Marginalization

While the movements of Jemna and Ouled Jaballah deal with different problems, both address the consequences of a flawed agricultural policy that has been implemented since colonialism, has continued after national independence, and deepened inequalities with the export-oriented policies of the last 50 years.

In the case of Jemna, as Mohamed Kerrou (2021) has shown, the date farm and the related conflicts about land, have their roots in the time of colonialism. During colonial occupation, formerly collectively used land had been appropriated by the authorities and transferred to a French investor who founded the date farm and exported its produce to Europe and the USA (*ibid.* 132–138). In 1938, the farm was sold to a Belgian investor; and after independence the Tunisian state took control over it. In 1963, the people of Jemna wanted to buy back the lot and paid the governorate of Gabes half of the requested price

for it as a deposit. However, the state used the capital to finance a range of economic projects and did not return the land to the Jemniens, but rather nationalized it in 1964, allowing the state owned national Tunisian company for the dairy industry to cultivate it (ibid. 16; 114). Decades later, when the company went bankrupt, the state rented the land in 2002 for a suspiciously low price to two businessmen with close ties to the regime (ibid. 140). Under their management, the land was insufficiently cultivated and yielded meagre profits (ibid. 115). During and after the revolution, when state administration and security forces were temporarily weakened, the people of Jemna took control over the farm, reorganized it and turned it into a model for successful collective management.

While the case of Jemna, today, is an exceptional example for collective management, it was, in the beginning, only one of numerous (post-)revolutionary occupations, as in 2011 individuals and groups all over Tunisia occupied state lands. As in Jemna, those people felt that they had a long-standing historical claim to the land and that the state had stolen it from them. Thus, they re-occupied the land and started cultivating it. At first, the state authorities let most of them continue to work the land. But with the power of the state institutions growing, especially after 2016, the state started to re-dispossess people of many of the occupied areas (Gana/Taleb 2019: 31–48). In the course of this development, the State Secretary of Public Estates froze the Jemna association's bank accounts in October 2016. But, with the help of national and international activists and media support, the local association was able to withstand this pressure and forced the government to re-open their accounts in July 2017 (Kerrou 2021: 380–381).

Similarly to Jemna, the dairy farmers of Ouled Jaballah were the victims of a long history of dispossession and agricultural mismanagement (Ayeb 2012). In Jemna, first state management and later privatization had cut off the town from the profits of the oasis. In Ouled Jaballah, the farmers had been slowly pushed out of business by the monopoly structures of the fodder market. Farmers feed their dairy cows with soy imported from the US. According to Bilel El-Mechri, the spokesperson of Ouled Jaballah's coordination committee, it used to be imported and distributed by the state's Cereal Office until, in 1997, it was handed over to a private company owned by the Ben Mokhtar family which had close ties to the Ben Ali regime. This company sells soy exclusively to three major fodder factories – Poulina, Alfa, and Alco – who formed an oligopoly and raised the fodder price dramatically (El-Mechri 2021, interview). Thus, while the state had fixed the price at which farmers could sell milk, costs of production increased. This is why many of the smaller dairy farmers had gone out of business (ibid.).

The dairy farmers' problems are part of an overall trend since the 1970s, when the government opted for export-oriented liberalization policies, and even more so since the 1980s implementation of neoliberal structural adjustment programmes. Increasingly, the Tunisian administration has steered the agricultural sector towards trade based and capital-intensive farming (Ayeb/Bush 2019: 86). As a consequence, small scale farmers have problems keeping their businesses profitable in the face of the competition from private investors and corporations that have privileged access to resources like loans and subsidies, water, land, or agricultural imports like soy (Fautras 2021: 109; 115; Ayeb/Bush 2019: 90–91). In Jemna and Ouled Jaballah the protestors signalled that they were not willing to continue living under these circumstances.

This indicates a moral economy, in the sense that both movements felt morally entitled to access to particular economic resources (Thompson 1971: 76–136). In the case of Jemna, it is about access to a particular plot of land, legitimized through an inter-generational ownership logic. As Tahar El-Tahri, former president of the association and long-term union activist, put it: ‘On this day, the 12th of January, they have burnt down the police station and they have reclaimed the properties that they had always considered to be theirs; it is the plot of land that belonged to our ancestors’ (El-Tahri 2021, interview). In the case of Ouled Jaballah, people feel they are entitled to making a decent living as dairy farmers, as the opening quote of this chapter highlights. Rather than the right to mere individual economic stability, this implies the right to a way of life.

When the state, often in conjunction with the private sector, blocked access to what people felt morally entitled to, the movements in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah sought alternative ways to guarantee their access through contentious politics and collective management of resources. Thus, the movements should be read as a critique of the socio-economic status quo.

Institutions: The Economic is Always Political

The movements in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah are based on two complementary and connected dynamics. On the one hand, they organize themselves politically by establishing forms of collective decision making. On the other hand, they organize themselves economically through the collective management of common resources. However, there are important differences between the two cases. In the case of Jemna, the whole movement is centred around the collective management of the date farm. The political structure built around the management of the farm, the Association de Protection d’Oasis de Jemna, organizes the work, markets the product, distributes the profit, and continues negotiations with state authorities about the legal status of the farm. In the case of Ouled Jaballah, the structures of collective decision-making and representation, embodied by the Coordination of Small Farmers, addresses a wide range of economic policies and functions as an interest group, almost like a union. The cooperative is an offspring of this broader political movement and is not at the centre of the conflicts and negotiations with state authorities. Also, both movements face different obstacles in establishing collective management structures. While in Jemna the juridical status of cultivating the farm is in question, the cooperative in Ouled Jaballah operates in a clear legal framework. However, the dairy farmers’ cooperative needs more capital for investing in equipment and infrastructure, while the date farm in Jemna can be profitable without much new investment. Furthermore, the cooperative in Ouled Jaballah involves many more people directly, because most of the farmers are a part of it. In contrast to this, the date farm in Jemna involves fewer people and the community profits indirectly since they have a say in the use of the profits. Thus, the institutions of collective self-management function differently in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah.

Nevertheless, there are important similarities. First of all, both cases of local collective resource management have the same target: to localize economic returns. The creation of the association in Jemna, as well as the cooperative in Ouled Jaballah, are ways

to cut off private companies from their access to agricultural profits. The association in Jemna took the farm directly out of the hands of private companies and has since then made sure that profits would stay within the community. It also plans to build a factory to process and export the dates, and thus control other parts of the value chain in order to keep even more profits in Jemna. The same is true for the cooperative in Ouled Jaballah. Here, the necessary capital for the cooperative will be paid by the members themselves, the dairy farmers, and this is aimed at cutting out the middlemen who make their profits from transporting milk and fodder between the farmers and factories. Their long-term goal is to invest in a local fodder factory to provide cheaper inputs and sideline the big companies.

Parallel to the structures of collective resource management, protesters in Ouled Jaballah and Jemna have established, via public assemblies, representative bodies to organize their action and to represent their movements when interacting with state institutions. The coordination committee in Ouled Jaballah consists of one spokesperson, Bilel El-Mechri, and seven members. The committee coordinated protest actions by making sure that some farmers took on the necessary daily work while others protested and confronted the police. It has also taken on the task of negotiating with state institutions about reforms. In the same way, the association in Jemna, consisting of ten council members, not only runs the date farm, but also deals with state authorities on questions of its legal status.

Both representative bodies directly report back to the people they represent and decide any further course of action with them. In Jemna, the association convenes an assembly whenever there is an important decision to take. A person with a loudspeaker informs the people, and usually between 100 and 200 men¹ show up to participate in the assembly. If they agree on a course of action, the association is entrusted with its implementation. However, according to Ali Ben Hamza, the treasurer of the association, the assemblies have become less frequent since 2019. When it comes to the day-to-day running of the farm, the association council has the mandate to make autonomous decisions, sometimes with the foremen's input (Ben Hamza 2021, interview).

In Ouled Jaballah, the coordination committee functions similarly. According to Bilel El-Mechri, '[t]he most important fact is that the committee never makes decisions alone, even though it is an elected entity' (El-Mechri 2021, interview). The coordination committee gathers the farmers at the central roundabout in the village when they have to report updates from government negotiations or in order to discuss new steps to be taken. Like in Jemna, the coordination committee works more like an executive body enforcing the decisions that have evolved from the public meetings.

As will be discussed below, the members of the association in Jemna and the coordination committee in Ouled Jaballah have a powerful role in the decision-making process. However, on a procedural level, those gatherings establish a direct link between the representation of the movement and the local society (i.e. the movement itself) as it evolves with the problems and questions at hand and through ongoing public discussion. In

1 In this case study, it is always the men who speak in public, which is in line with local customs. The extent to which they speak on behalf of the women depends on their individual positioning, but remains unclear here.

both cases, we find a direct link between economic (re-)distribution and collective decision making. This indicates that inequality is not only expressed in access to material goods but also in access to political procedures and to the collective shaping of realities. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the movements in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah requires a multi-layered approach to inequality that takes into account the close links between all those dimensions.

Consensuses and Un-imposed Order

The collective decision-making processes in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah are based on a range of similar principles. Firstly, both cases display a clear preference for direct participation (as opposed to representation) and consensus (as opposed to majority votes) as the basis for collective decisions. In the two communities, votes are being used to elect the representatives in official (state recognized) bodies, but not used in public gatherings. When I asked my interview partners how they resolved differences in those gatherings they told me:

There are usually many opinions, but we filter them out and pick the best ones until we arrive at a unified point of view. It's a democratic process. At the end, when a decision is taken, everyone has to support it because it's the group's decision. That is why the police forces were not able to break the sit-in despite their large numbers (El-Mechri 2021, interview).

Even if the decision is not the one somebody prefers, he has seen that the majority is supporting it – therefore he accepts it. He might have tried to defend his point of view, but unfortunately for him, he has not been convincing enough (El-Tahri 2021, interview).

Consensus, thus, does not mean that everybody shares the same opinion, but rather that everybody supports a collective decision because they can participate in the process of forming an opinion. My interview partners highlighted the importance of the fact that every single person can speak and be heard at the public gatherings. That means that every (male) person feels heard and his voice respected, but also that everybody gets a good idea of why the group make certain decisions. An example: In their negotiation with state authorities, the representatives from Ouled Jaballah agreed on a ten days 'ceasefire' during which the protests were supposed to stop and the regional council would have time to talk to the ministry about the protestors' demands. When the representatives from the coordination committee reported this back to the protestors in a public gathering, some of the farmers were against halting the protests. After a heated discussion, the farmers agreed to accept the 'ceasefire', partly because the reasons convinced them, but also because the coordination committee agreed that they, as Bilel El-Mechri put it, would be held accountable if their strategy did not work. According to El-Mechri, those discussions were intense but very productive. In such a process, decisions don't need to be imposed because everybody supports them, which is what Mohamed Bamyeh, in his at-

tempt to systematize anarchist thought and practice, calls ‘un-imposed order’ (Bamyeh 2009: 27).

Un-imposed order requires a continual process of interaction in which the people involved have the chance to inform themselves and others, discuss and find common ground and a collective course of action for every new problem, situation, or question that comes up. Both in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah the public gatherings provide such an opportunity. This, however, requires participants to be able and willing to continuously take a position on different issues, revise their position in the course of public discussion, and finally come to a collective understanding and decision. This means that the gatherings require a ‘willingness to become’ (Bamyeh 2009: 30), to permanently change yourself and others in a collective process.

In Jemna in 2012, for example, some members of the association, among them Tahar Etahri tried to found a company that could have taken on the management of the farm. When they could not generate a consensus among the people in Jemna, they went through with establishing the company anyway. Even though the management of the company was supposed to represent many different parts of the oasis’s society, the whole affair created resentment among the community and the company had to be closed soon after its foundation due to public opposition. In our interview, Tahar Etahri told me:

We proceeded stupidly and members of the association, three members [...] first of all I take my responsibility [...] me (and two others) made the decision after a meeting with the former Tunisian Minister of Agriculture [...]. When we came to Jemna and told the people that we would establish a company, we did not find mutual agreement among the people. This is why we acted alone. [...]. That was the big mistake that we made (El-Tahri 2021, interview).

In this instance, the ongoing and living process of the movement in Jemna outweighed the attempt to create new institutional structures (based on private interest), the development of which was made possible by the movement itself. While more centralized institutions have a tendency to become rigid and follow their own logic, the movements in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah represent living processes that can challenge and revise existing strategies and institutions on the basis of collective decision making.

Power Relations: Authority and Trust

In the two communities, representation is only used when it is necessary, which is mostly the case when state authorities need a ‘recognizable’ body to negotiate with. But how do those formal bodies of representation influence the power relations inside the movement? How is authority established and legitimized in movements that have a preference for direct collective decision making? Both, the association in Jemna and the coordination committee in Ouled Jaballah, were founded *ad hoc* in turbulent situations to fulfil particular purposes: to organize movements and to represent those movements in dealings with the state. In both cases, the people of the movements chose representatives. In

Jemna, the members of the association were later elected through ballots. In both cases, people with activist experience convinced other protestors to establish organizational structures and to manage local resources collectively.

In Jemna, it was an old guard of well-respected men who convinced the protestors to keep the farm intact and not divide the land among different people. This was a group of teachers and educators, most of whom had experience as activists within a union; some of them later became the spokespeople of the movement and initiated the foundation of the association (Etahri 2021, interview). Their experience is why many of the young people who also occupied the farm valued their opinion and trusted them. According to Ali Ben Hamza, the trust in the association, apart from the social and cultural capital of the people involved, has been enhanced as much by the fact that the members of the association personally make no money, as by the positive economic outcomes (Ben Hamza 2021, interview).

In Ouled Jaballah, a group of activists convinced farmers to hold a sit-in. They suggested founding a coordination committee, explained the advantages of it, and then gave the farmers time to think about it. When the latter agreed to the idea, the activists asked them to choose representatives that were trustworthy and competent:

I explained these two conditions to them because they are the most important ones in my opinion. The members have to be competent enough to deliver the demands, able to negotiate, and trustworthy. [...]. As you know, many people are opportunistic bureaucrats. They deliver the demands and then they serve their own interests (El-Mechri 2021, interview).

The protestors then identified seven representatives during public meetings and nominated Bilel El-Mechri to be their spokesperson. When I asked Bilel, why the farmers trusted him, he told me:

Trust is the result of experiences. It can increase or decrease. During that period, there was pressure from police, authority, etc. We were under several threats. I never fell back and I never hesitated. I think that this increased the farmers' trust in me (El-Mechri 2021, interview).

Overall, there are both: positions of authority and subsequent power inequalities that exist inside the movements of Jemna and Ouled Jaballah. The association and the coordination committee have the power to make small decisions by themselves and to lead negotiations with state authorities. They also can decide whether or not and when to convene public meetings with the wider movement. Also, certain individuals are more powerful, have more social capital, and have more influence on decisions. This is the case with Tahar Etahri and Bilel El-Mechri. Mohamed Kerrou, in his comprehensive study on Jemna, identifies Etahri's role as a teacher, his activist past, and his belonging to an old family as the basis of his authority. He characterizes him as a 'consensual and democratic leader' (Kerrou 2021: 124). This reveals the constitution and importance of personal positions of authority inside the movements. However, those positions rely on continued efforts to build trust and respect. Their individual authority is under regular scrutiny as

long as the movements are driven by permanent collective and direct interaction. But how and why are the people in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah able and willing to partake in a continuing process of collective negotiation and action?

Solidarity: The Economic and Political are Always Cultural

The representatives of the movements emphasize how important the culture of discussion is to their projects. It seems that the movements enable people to interact in a way that further empowers mutual understanding and collective action. As Bilel El-Mechri describes it: ‘the dairy farmers have the energy to intensively and respectfully discuss issues because they went through collective experiences which forged solidarity’. When I asked him why the heated debates in the gatherings did not turn violent, he reasoned: ‘Solidarity exists between them, and the solidarity has been created by the police attacks. Everyone fought together. Together we were exposed to teargas. Everyone became a target and could get shot’ (El-Mechri, 2021, interview). Solidarity, then, can be understood not only as a condition for collective decision-making and action, but also as its result. One constitutes the other – and *vice versa*. Existing experiences express themselves in cooperation and cooperation creates new experiences. Thus, the explanation for the success of both movements might not lie outside the movements but within them: to a certain degree, the movements made themselves possible. For both communities the immediate reality of the movements brought into being the development of new cognitive tools, a new mode of interaction, and opened up a process of collective becoming. A becoming that is not a realization of some basic existing truth like a ‘tradition’ but something new, adding to the existing forms of interaction. In this way, decision-making processes (politics) and material resource management (economics) are always also tied to individual and collective world making (culture) – the open ended and continuous becoming of individuals and communities.

A concept that lends itself to understanding the connection between those three dimensions is the notion of ‘commons’ in the way Silke Helfrich and David Bollier define it (Helfrich/Bollier 2015, 2019). Commons describe forms of production that are collective and oriented towards the needs of a community. Helfrich and Bollier identify three categories of commoning ‘patterns’: commons provisioning (economic), peer governance (political), and social life (cultural) – all of which the movements of Jemna and Ouled Jaballah exhibit to a certain extent. In terms of commons provisioning, both cases are characterized by ‘collective production and use’ of local resources (ibid. 159). In terms of peer governance, they exhibit ‘transparency in places of trust’ (ibid. 125) and ‘deciding with a collective voice’ (ibid. 129). In terms of social life, both movements are ‘cultivating shared intentions and values’ (ibid. 99), ‘working through conflicts in a way that preserves relations’ (ibid. 108), and ‘establishing collective rituals’ (ibid. 100). This notion of commoning corresponds to the multidimensional understanding of inequality mentioned above. It is a set of practices that address economic, political and social inequality at the same time.

Examples of comprehensive, full-fledged commoning are hard to find. When we analyse examples of commoning, a variety of patterns exist or are absent in different cases (ibid. 91). This is certainly the case in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah where important

inequalities persist. Most obviously, the people directly involved in the movements are predominantly men. In Ouled Jaballah, women have been involved in the protests and public discussions, but it is men who take the leadership of the movement. In Jemna, women have been involved in providing food for the protestors but are not part of the public discussions. When I asked Tahar Etahri about the absence of women, he explained: ‘This is a question of mentality. Perhaps, there are a lot of female activists in the cities. But in the villages, this is rare. The association does not have to take responsibility for the absence of women’ (Etahri 2021, interview). Another limitation, besides the male dominance of the movements, is that, so far, sustainability has not played an important role. This is mostly because, in both cases, the management of local resources still functions according to the constraints of profit maximization, even though those profits might be socialized inside the community, as is the case in Jemna.

What about the State?

Mohamed Kerrou has shown that the movement in Jemna prioritizes legitimacy over legality and thus questions the ‘bureaucratic organization of economy and society’ (Kerrou 2021: 18). This distinction between legitimacy and legality is one that Bilel El-Mechri also mentioned in our interview:

There are necessary legal procedures like legally registering the association so that it appears in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Tunisia. I do not care for that. What really matters to me is that something was created by the farmers and that they considered it real. That’s all. That’s what matters to me (El-Mechri 2021, interview).

Because existing legal bodies lost their legitimacy, the institution of ‘coordination committees’ spread fast. The farmers’ union, according to Bilel El-Mechri, had lost the trust of the farmers:

We established coordinating committees in other regions like Ksour Essaf, Ferchich, Gharayra, Ouled Bousmir, Bouzayyen, Oueslatia, Hajeb Laayoun, etc. The farmers were all convinced that the farmers’ union does not represent them [...]. When we started this thing, the idea spread. We contacted some farmers. Others have adopted the idea by themselves (El-Mechri, 2021, interview).

Thus, both movements question the legitimacy of existing state institutions and offer alternative processes of establishing legitimate (self-)governance through direct participation, consensus decision making, and collective resource management. As such they have a complicated relationship with the state. In the case of Jemna the state is mainly perceived as the force that dispossessed their ancestors of their land and secured the accumulation of capital through appropriation of local resources. In Ouled Jaballah the state is experienced as the force that organized the liberalization of the fodder market in a corrupt way, and, again, secured the accumulation of capital through appropriation of local resources. When both movements tried to reclaim a part of their resources, the

state turned out to be an obstacle, represented, for example, by the security forces. While in 2011 in Jemna security forces were overstrained and hesitating, the police in Ouled Jaballah (ten years later) had a clear strategy, one that had been developed in clashes with protestors in other parts of Tunisia. Bilel El-Mechri emphasized that shortly before the police forces entered Ouled Jaballah, the same policemen had been deployed in Hay Ettadhamen in the capital, where a well-known series of riots in disenfranchised neighbourhoods had recently occurred. The police, according to him, used the same strategies as they had in Ettadhamen, firing tear gas at houses and estates that were not involved in the protest. This ‘random violence’ discouraged the bystanders and protestors in the capital, and finally the protests were dissolved. However, Bilel El-Mechri takes pride in the fact that this strategy did not work in Ouled Jaballah:

The Ouled Jaballah sit-in is the only one in the entire country that the police have failed to dismantle. [...] . When they attacked people's homes here, the people went outside and fought back, even those who have never hit a cop before. We showed the people of Ouled Jaballah what had happened in Ettadhamen and how the cops attack everyone regardless of who they are. We advertised those events in our favour and the people showed solidarity (El-Mechri 2021, interview).

Thus, the violent clashes with the police did not end the sit-in but furthered the solidarity amongst the protestors, which was one of the key factors that allowed the movement to develop in the way it did towards collective organization. However, even though in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah protestors questioned the sovereignty of the state, they still address government institutions with their demands and thus accept the state as a negotiation partner. In Jemna, negotiations about the legal status of the land and how it should be cultivated have been ongoing since 2011. Relationships with the authorities have had their ups and downs, resulting in a series of conflicts since 2016. However, like in Ouled Jaballah, when conflict with the state intensified, the people in Jemna seem to have closed their ranks: ‘There are people who are against the association, but they are very few. But in 2016, even those who were against the association came with us to confront the state’ (Etahri, 2021, interview). Nevertheless, the association is looking for a way to collaborate with the state, not to replace it, as long as the profit from local resources stays in Jemna. Similarly, in Ouled Jaballah, the movement has clashed with state authorities, only to address their demands later to the governor of Mahdia and the regional council. The farmers don't want to do away with the state but rather hope to change both its economic policies and the political channels to address them. Instead of the farmers' union, they want the coordination committee to represent them:

The coordination is not judicially legal. But for us, this is not a judicial matter. It is about the *status quo*. The governor kicked out the farmers' union, which is an organization that has been active since 1982, and kept us in the room (El-Mechri, 2021, interview).

Conclusion

The self-governed movements in Jemna and Ouled Jaballah can be understood as anarchist practices (Bamyeh 2009) and forms of commoning (Helfrich/Bollier 2019). They create access to resources, to meaningful participation in decision-making processes and to collective world making – combining capabilities and aspirations (Gertel/Grüneisel, this volume). They are a reaction to a long history of regional and sectorial marginalization that can be traced to colonial times and has been exacerbated since the 1970s. As such, they encourage us to think about inequality as multidimensional. They suggest that the widespread public discontent with the economic and political order after 2010/2011 might not only be grounded in material inequality but also in inequality of possibilities to participate and to collectively shape the world. This is why Mohamed Kerrou understands Jemna as a successful manifestation of the Tunisians' revolutionary demands for 'work, freedom, and dignity' (Kerrou 2021: 52). The experiences of Jemna and Ouled Jaballah reveal that alternative forms of governance and economy are suited well to address the inequalities that many Tunisians are facing today.

