

MEET THE CCED 25/26 HUMPHREY FELLOWS!



From supporting businesses in the private sector to leading outreach initiatives that connect institutions with entrepreneurs and local businesses, Desarta Rapushaj's career reflects her deep commitment to inclusive and sustainable development. She is a 2025–2026 Humphrey Fellow from Albania, currently hosted at Michigan State University and working with her faculty advisor, Mary ZumBrunnen, Assistant Director at the Center for Community and Economic Development. Desarta was born and raised in Albania, a small country in Southeastern Europe and part of the Western Balkans region. With its Adriatic and Ionian coastlines, rich cultural heritage, and dynamic path toward European Union integration, Albania has been both her home and her inspiration. Growing up in this context shaped her perspective on resilience, progress, and the importance of building strong bridges between people, communities, and institutions.

Her academic background combines finance and governance. She first earned a master's degree in finance, which gave her a solid foundation in business and economic analysis, and later completed a second master's in European Policies and Governance, focusing on EU integration,



Desarta Rapushaj

2025–2026

Humphrey Fellow



public administration, and regional development. This academic path provided her with both technical knowledge and policy insight, preparing her to connect institutions with businesses and communities in practical and meaningful ways. With over 11 years of professional experience across both the private and public sectors, her journey began in the banking industry, where she worked as a credit analyst supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

There, she saw how access to finance could empower entrepreneurs to expand their businesses, create jobs, and bring stability to families. Motivated to broaden this mission beyond finance, she later transitioned into Business Supporting Organizations such as the Albanian Investment Development Agency and the Agriculture and Rural Development Agency. In these roles, she contributed to programs that enhance SME competitiveness, support businesses in reaching new markets, and opened opportunities through national and EU-funded initiatives.

One of the most meaningful aspects of her work has been leading outreach initiatives across Albania, where she connected directly with entrepreneurs, businesses, and communities. These moments of dialogue and exchange inspired collaboration, built trust, and turned development programs into real opportunities that people could believe in. They also reinforced her conviction that lasting change happens when institutions engage openly and work side-by-side with the people they serve.

The Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship has provided Desarta with an opportunity to expand this mission globally. At Michigan State University, she is focusing on economic development, SME competitiveness, and sustainable finance. She is pursuing courses that strengthen her understanding of development and leadership, including Understanding and Assessing the Global Business Environment and Developing Strategic Business Models at the Eli Broad College of Business, as well as Policy Implementation and Administration at the Department of Political Science. These academic engagements allow her to combine economic and business perspectives with policy approaches, building a holistic view of how institutions and markets can work together to drive sustainable development.

The fellowship is also about collaboration across borders. Alongside 11 other Humphrey Fellows at MSU, Desarta is exchanging knowledge and perspectives with professionals from around the world, exploring how diverse contexts can tackle shared challenges. This international exchange underscores her belief that while countries may differ in their circumstances, their aspirations for inclusive and sustainable futures are universal.

Beyond her institutional roles, Desarta has participated in numerous international initiatives. She was part of the Swedish Institute's Young Professionals Program on digital governance and worked as Marketing and Communications Coordinator for the Albania Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. In this global role, she developed and implemented strategies to promote Albania's presence and coordinated business missions that connected Albanian enterprises with global partners. She has also actively engaged in international fairs, forums, and B2B meetings, expanding networks and creating new opportunities for collaboration.

Looking ahead, Desarta hopes to return to Albania equipped with new tools, knowledge, and partnerships to accelerate EU integration, enhance SME competitiveness, and foster sustainable rural development. Her journey as a Humphrey Fellow is not only about professional growth but also about resilience, leadership, and the conviction that meaningful change happens when institutions and communities work together toward a shared vision of progress.

For more information about Desarta Rapushaj's work, connect with her on [LinkedIn](#) or email at drapushaj90@gmail.com.



Meher Bejaoui

2025–2026 Humphrey Fellow

My journey to the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship at Michigan State University has not been a linear path, but a convergence of diverse disciplines, from natural sciences and engineering to international development and public administration. Today, as a Humphrey Fellow, I find myself dedicated to enhancing public management and governance to drive sustainable economic transformation in Tunisia, learning from various experiences in Michigan and mentor, Mary ZumBrunnen. Currently, I serve as an Assistant Director at the Presidency of the Government of Tunisia. In this capacity, I handle the complex human resources and labor relations aspects of State-Owned Enterprises, ensuring they remain compliant, efficient, and socially impactful.



Also, I analyze draft budgets and annual performance reports to ensure sustainability in public financial management. My daily work involves navigating balance between strict compliance and operational efficiency. It is a role that requires administrative oversight and an understanding of how large-scale organizations function within a broader economic ecosystem.

Why the Humphrey Fellowship? What inspired me to apply for the Humphrey Fellowship was a desire to transcend the technical day-to-day operations of public administration and master the strategic leadership required to effect real world change. My background is multidisciplinary by design. I hold a master's degree in engineering from the National Engineering School of Sfax and a bachelor's in biology and geology. This scientific training gave me a foundation in systems thinking and precision. However, as I transitioned into public service, I realized that solving complex multistakeholder challenges requires more than technical solutions. This led me to pursue a master's in international studies at Korea University in Seoul.

Yet, I recognized that to truly optimize the economic and social impacts of Tunisia's SOEs, I

needed to refine my negotiation skills and deepen my expertise in analytical decision-making. I saw the Humphrey Fellowship as a platform to engage with US policymakers, academic professors and scholars and thought leaders. I wanted to understand how different complex governance models balance efficiency with levels of accountability, and how those models could be adapted to other contexts.

Since arriving at Michigan State University, my focus has been on the intricacies of governance models and organizational management. My work is centered on leadership development, capacity building, sustainable economies and technical expertise in public finance. When I return to Tunisia, my goal is to position myself as a catalyst for inclusive economic transformation. The insights I am gathering at MSU and Michigan are directly applicable to my role at the Presidency of the Government.

Specifically, I intend to implement new organizational and HR improvements that prioritize sustainability and efficiency within our SOEs. My aim is to move beyond standard compliance audits and toward a model of performance governance, where enterprises are financially viable and drivers of social and economic development. I plan to use the negotiation and leadership skills honed during this Fellowship to foster better labor relations and promote sustainable environments. By bridging the gap between administrative compliance and strategic vision, I hope to contribute to a public sector that is more agile, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the citizens and different stakeholders.

The Humphrey Fellowship is more than a professional development program, where it is an opportunity to step back from the daily demands of the office to look at the big picture. It is refining my ability to turn complex policy challenges into actionable projects. I am eager to keep learning and improving personally and professionally.



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