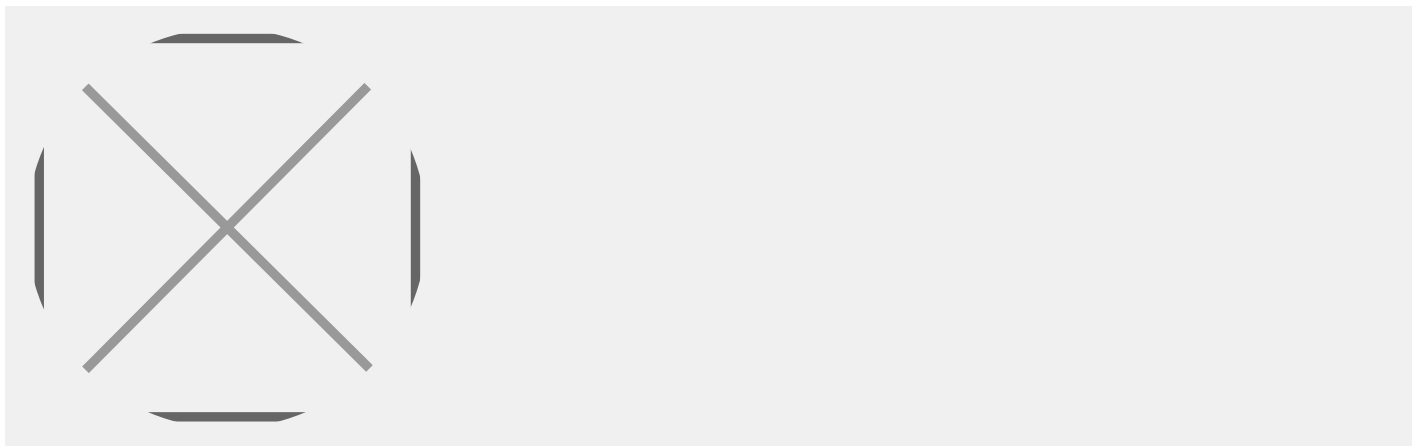


# Interview with María Cristina Álvarez, President, Novartis De Colombia S.A.

---



29.07.2012

Tags: [Novartis De Colombia S.A.](#)

---

## **Being an industry giant with operations in over one hundred countries worldwide, what is the role and significance of Colombia for Novartis global?**

As a global company, our overall mission is to discover, develop, and successfully market innovative products to prevent and cure diseases; to ease suffering; and to enhance the quality of life of our patients around the world. Colombia in itself is a very attractive and significant market for achieving that goal. Since the Ley 100 in 1993 and its ensuing health reforms, Colombia has increased health coverage for its population from 25% to over 90% this year. It is a market that is continuously growing. It is the fourth largest in the region and therefore represents an important business opportunity for us. In addition Colombia offers an investor friendly environment that facilitates investment decisions for Novartis.

## **What is the innovative footprint of Novartis here in Colombia? What are the most successful product lines that really make a difference and attest to Novartis' identity as a global, innovative company?**

The innovative footprint of Novartis in Colombia is represented in three areas mainly: research, ethics, and people development.

An important part of our activities in Colombia are rooted in clinical research. Between 2007 and 2010, we have carried out a total of 123 clinical trials, representing an investment of \$19 million. We invested over \$5 million in R&D in 2009 alone, and we are currently conducting this research in different therapeutic areas such as cardiovascular, respiratory, and oncology, among others with

over 225 physicians in more than 150 centers throughout Colombia. This investment clearly reflects our commitment with research in the country.

Novartis Colombia was the first pharmaceutical company in the country to become a signatory to the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), taking a leadership position in the implementation of its ten principles. In addition, our company follows the group Third Party Management policy. We work closely with all suppliers and third party contractors to safeguard the inclusion of human rights in their business practices and policies. Novartis is a signatory of the Anticorruption Pact, an initiative led by the Vice President of Colombia, and is ruled by the Ethics Code of the Research and Development Association.

With respect to people, several policies are in place in order to: pursue a right balance between work and life; give our associates the best training available; and adequately remunerate our associates with equitable wages that contribute to improving the professional level of people working for Novartis directly or indirectly.

Regarding our most important products, I have to talk about Gleevec, a product that has been in the market for nearly ten years to treat chronic myeloid leukemia. This product had fast-track FDA approval since its tremendous benefits compared to other products in the market were immediately recognized by patients and physicians even before having completed all research phases. It has been the #1 Novartis product for the past five years and has benefitted many patients by extending their life expectancy after a 7 year follow-up period by about 30 years.

Our cardiovascular portfolio is one of the largest in the market with more than 50,000 patients in clinical trials who have proven our molecules to be not only highly effective but very protective in the long term. Thousands of patients in Colombia have benefitted from our products Diovan, Exforge and Rasilez.

**With the rise of competition in the prescription and institutional markets what are the main concerns, if any, for a company such as Novartis that has such an edge in innovation?**

Our products are extremely innovative which definitely gives us a competitive advantage over the growing competition in the private and institutional markets. An area of concern in Colombia is that we need to assure that all the intellectual property regulations are honored by the various government institutions. Colombia as a country has a good intellectual property system, however, there are enormous problems in compliance and enforcement.

We also have concerns regarding generic competition. We have a generic division within Novartis and our desire is that all generics in the market comply with the same standards – the highest standards – of bioequivalence and bioavailability. The local regulations on bio-bio do not fulfill international standards.

Now, with the Social Emergency Crisis, new concerns arise over some of the proposed reforms to fix the system. We think that the health system in Colombia is very advanced and far and wide

better than other national health systems in Latin America, despite the crisis. Yes, it may need some reforms. But the government needs to ensure that the system continues evolving for the better.

**How have Novartis' innovative products contributed to its recent growth, and, in light of pending health reforms to the system that you mention, what are the projections for 2010?**

2009 was very good year for Novartis. I have only been back in Colombia for one and half years and last year we grew by almost 20%. We expect a similar growth rate for this year, mainly because we have many new and innovative products.

**What are the some of Novartis' proudest achievements in the realm of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that shows its commitment to the sustainable development of Colombia?**

In Colombia we have a very significant program that has been running for the past five years called "A Roof for Colombia." (Un Techo para Colombia). It is a very integrated recycling program within the company. The system goes as follows: our employees and their families recycle materials which they bring here to the company, we sell them, and with Novartis matches that same amount to purchase a home for a soldier wounded in combat. Through that program we have already provided three houses in Bogotá and Medellín and we are looking to expand the program, perhaps by entering alliances with commercial partners or other interested parties.

**Do you think that Novartis, being one of the top global companies in the pharmaceutical industry, is held to a higher standard with CSR?**

Yes, we certainly have the added responsibility to be not just a follower of CSR, but an agent of change. Another pillar of our global CSR program is environmental care. We are committed to reduce global CO2 emissions and strictly adhere to the internal rules that we set. This new building that we are in is a green building that has special features such as: use of natural light, a natural air-conditioning system and water recycling system all of which reduce energy consumption to a minimum. This building will be the very first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified building in Colombia. In that way, we are a major agent of change in this field.

**Novartis constantly tops three different lists of corporate rankings: the most innovative company in its field, the most ethical company in its industry, and one of the best places to work. Concerning the latter, what makes Novartis such a great place to work?**

We have a culture that encourages participation. We have a collaborative environment that tries to get the most out of our individuals and out of our teams. I believe that "1 + 1 is greater than 2." We offer very competitive salaries and benefits to our employees. We are very strong in talent management and development programs, constantly investing in our people. We also have very

flexible time agreements. Being a competitive company many people work a lot, but in exchange we have flexible time arrangements to provide balance between work and personal life.

We have around 600 employees in Colombia both directly and indirectly working for us. There is a strong female presence in our company that comprises approximately 70% of our workforce.

Finally I would like to comment on an initiative that is a center piece in our culture: "Diversity and Inclusion." We believe that creating an inclusive environment, where differences are valued as a central part of our culture, processes and strategy will have a direct impact on our business and therefore a wide array of activities are conducted on this specific regard.

**How do you approach your role as a female executive? Do you find that there added responsibilities that come with being a female corporate?**

I think that for women in top positions it has been a common occurrence in their careers to be "the only" woman. When I was appointed President of Novartis Ecuador I was the first woman in that position in the Novartis world.

I do not see any difference in the actual workload and demands of the job, but the responsibilities that we have as women, being able to achieve top positions, is that we should serve as role models for other aspiring women. We should show people and other women that it is possible to achieve the top position. Many times women cast stereotypes upon themselves that prevent them from reaching for the top. Women need to put those stereotypes aside. If they have a clear goal and want to succeed and do everything to reach that objective, it is possible.

**This beautiful, brand new, soon-to-be LEED certified building that we are in was recently inaugurated by President Álvaro Uribe. What were some words that President Uribe said about Novartis Colombia at the inaugural ceremony?**

He was very pleased to have in Colombia for the first time the Chairman of the Board of Directors, Dr. Daniel Vasella.

President Uribe gave us a special acknowledgment for the important investment made in the construction of our new facilities and highlighted its green characteristics. He mentioned as well that Novartis plays an important role in the pillars of the current administration: investor confidence for doing business and believing in Colombia; social policy for having very harmonious labor relations; and social responsibility for contributing to the environment with the construction of an environmentally friendly site .

This building is in a very crowded sector of the city and it is important to change constructors' way of thinking of when they are starting a new project. I know that because of this building other buildings in this area, in this city, and in this country are going to follow the trend that we set.

**What are the most important goals you want to achieve under your leadership as General Manager?**

I want to drive this company towards a decade of continuous growth. I think you have to challenge yourself with more aggressive growth targets. Once you hit a target you then start to see the next target as more and more achievable in a way that you perhaps did not see it before. In addition, we want to be recognized as the partner of choice for physicians, government, patients and institutions making our innovative products accessible to everyone who needs them.

[See more interviews](#)