

Ayman Cheikh Lahlou - Director General, Cooper Pharma - Morocco



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The director general of Cooper Pharma explains how the company has become the leading Moroccan player, why Morocco's relationship with Africa is one of cooperation not exploitation, and how the country now needs to look towards innovation if it is to compete.

Cooper Pharma celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2013, having established itself as the number one Moroccan laboratory in the country. How have you managed to achieve such success?

Time is the most important factor. We have been around for a while, and over that time we have learned not to be opportunistic: we take time to carefully think through our strategies and to form long-term partnerships. The notion of long-term thinking is a particularly important part of our DNA. Secondly, the name Cooper derives from the French word "cooperation" -we are a laboratory that has always worked as a team, collaborating with other parties. Thirdly, Cooper was started off as a subsidiary of a French multinational, Cooper France, which was acquired by Rhône-Poulenc and then eventually Sanofi Aventis. We went through a period where we were a subsidiary of a multinational, then a joint venture with Moroccan investors, and then finally a fully autonomous Moroccan company in the early 2000s. This process was done in stages, and we capitalized on every stage.

The fact is that as a company, we are open to cooperation, we invest enormously in our human talent and have autonomous teams. We have a governing structure that is not family dominated, even though the company is family-owned, but our history with the multinationals has allowed us to develop such an approach. The other ingredient that we have is to always have a diverse portfolio of products, including licensed products as well as branded generics.

In 2013 we have started a new production plant for injectables. Two years ago we also built a facility packaging vaccines unit for GSK, the first of its kind in Morocco. We also recently signed a joint venture agreement for respiratory and CNS products with Cipla Laboratories and an important aspect of this agreement is dedicated to local manufacturing. This Joint Venture is made along with PHI laboratory also.

Can you tell us more about this joint venture agreement signed with Cipla in February 2015?

Our relationship with Cipla dates back to 2002. It is an excellent partnership based on transfers of technology as well as products. Cipla's new strategy is to target markets with strong growth prospects that can become hubs for other countries. Together we will produce respiratory products as well as work together on CNS products, and it is a relationship that will allow us to export to Africa, where Morocco is well positioned, as well as in the MENA region and the GCC.

The joint venture is the result of a fruitful 12-year relationship, and is a new step towards consolidating our relationship. The agreement will also allow Cipla to use Morocco as a gateway to Africa and the Middle East and, most importantly, for Morocco, it will allow us to produce locally respiratory inhalers, as until now we have only been importing them.

You are the first Moroccan laboratory present in West Africa. Given your success do you believe that the Moroccan ambition to become an Africa hub is a realistic one?

There is a clear Moroccan strategy, not exclusive to the pharma industry, which has seen Moroccan businesses such as banks, telecoms, transport providers... establish a solid presence in Africa. Today we are at a stage where industries based more on consumption goods are trying to grow their presence in the region. There is a real coherence with regards to this Moroccan strategy, a relationship not based on exploitation but on working together to evolve together in a win-win cooperation for all the countries concerned. Cooper has been in Africa since the late 1990s, well before such a defined ambition existed. We have signed a project to promote local manufacturing in the Ivory Coast and we believe that just as Morocco has a certain degree of self-sufficiency when it comes to the production of medicines, with a high level of manufacturing quality, that other

countries in Africa should develop the same capacity. For the MNC, the cooperation is different without a need of additional local manufacturing but Cooper is open to the technology transfer models. As a Moroccan player, Cooper has the flexibility to pursue such an approach, with it forming a key part of our vision.

Does Cooper have any plans to target the European market?

The generics business model in Europe is very different, with a long history. In MENA and Africa, we have a branded generics model because there is still a lack of understanding about the benefits of the generic model, from all stakeholders. Additionally, because of the European generics business model, to be a successful player in Europe you need to have a complete portfolio with an aggressive sales approach. From a manufacturing perspective, Cooper definitely has the quality standards to export to Europe and we have done so since 2000, but from the commercial side it would be much more challenging, to be a key player in the generics field. The opportunities lie in selected and niche therapeutic classes.

What is your approach to the MENA region, where you have a subsidiary in Dubai?

For Morocco, the MENA zone is a natural export area to focus on. The first step for us was to be certified by the Saudi authorities, which was done in 2011. Then we started to register our products and finally we began commercial operations in these countries.

Currently 11 percent of your products are sold abroad. What is your vision for the future?

Our aim is to have this number at 25 to 30 percent within the next five to seven years and to do this organically. In terms of priorities, we look first to the Moroccan market where the growth of generics is still at an early stage, and then we look to Africa and the MENA region for our exports.

What about the future of the Moroccan market?

The Moroccan pharma industry is the place to be because we have an extremely high level of quality classified at a European level. We are a market that is growing, with access to Africa and the MENA region. Now we need to begin to think about innovation, not just relying on generics. We need to find the means to innovate, even if these are incremental innovations. This is the future: to be a successful exporter we need to differentiate ourselves.

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