Interview: Hammadi Ayadi – CEO, BiotechPole Sidi Thabet, Tunisia



"In 2020, the BiotechPole will have successfully opened its Technology Research Center (CRT) that will encompass an operational production line and employees that are perfectly able to operate it."

23.10.2017

Tags: Tunisia, BiotechPole Sidi Thabet, Technology, Strategy, Biotechnology

Hammadi Ayadi, CEO of Sidi Thabet BiotechPole, proudly introduces the launch of the site's incubator and announces the soon-to-come opening of the company cluster. This will provide a platform for the fusion of theoretical research and technical knowhow and aid the development of the first biotech drug made in Tunisia by 2020. The future of biotechnological research looks bright under the umbrella of an ambitious, passionate but nonetheless down-to-earth BiotechPole.

Ayadi, what is BiotechPole Sidi Thabet and what exactly are its main missions?

BiotechPole Sidi Thabet is an enterprise that has the responsibility to support the government in the fulfilment of its objectives in the country. The three ministries of higher education, of industry and of health all pursue a strategy aiming at driving innovation in the health sector and thus the pharmaceutical industry in Tunisia. The BiotechPole positions itself as the platform upon which those objectives can become reality. We can be apprehended as an interface between the university environment, the research entities and the pharmaceutical industry that wants to translate the results of said researches into concrete applications. Our mission is to enable the pharmaceutical industry to access quality and innovation by giving it the liberty to move about on an exchange platform together with local innovators. Therefore, we operate in order to maximize the development of local production and the export capacity of the Tunisian pharmaceutical industry by optimizing the specific development of the field of biotechnologies.

BiotechPole was established as a response to the need of local and international companies to engage in exchanges with research bodies from which they are separated. We offer our site as an ideal meeting environment that provides a favorable framework for collaborative efforts. One aspect of said framework is the incubator that was launched this year and welcomes young innovators wishing to establish themselves on our geographic site. The incubator helps them to develop and launch their projects. Once the projects are well under way, they can then move to our company hotel where we hold space for such kick-off projects, or they can build their own laboratory on our terrain.

We further hold a responsibility towards regional development, supporting both the Sidi Thabet region and the governorate of Ariana.

What are the main focus points the BiotechPole will target in the near future?

[Featured_in]

The first step was the launch of the incubator and the recruitment and welcoming of the innovators it will foster. It was launched in February 2017, and today I can proudly say that we almost fully manned the available positions. As a matter of fact, the two first products developed within the BiotechPole already bring concrete proof of what we can achieve. They constitute our first success story.

Now that the incubator is officially launched, we can announce that the ecosystem is ready to welcome innovations! The focus now shifts towards assisting the innovators by providing the necessary framework for their projects and demonstrating the trust we are putting in them, showing them that we believe in their ambitions. Of course, there is no better way to do this than by having the means to show the very tangible products of our work such as the afore mentioned two first launches of the first six months since the opening of the incubator. From now on, we will focus on the two next steps that are the offering of courses and the company cluster that will be built within the BiotechPole.

It is crucial the courses be put in place in parallel to any projects leading towards the development of innovative molecules. Indeed, the scientific frame and level for any innovation has to be maintained and is truly the base for the evolution of any project. Although educative efforts in biotechnology have been made since the 2000ies, the true dimension of biotechnology was not taken into account. Moreover, Tunisia is somewhat lacking behind because of its tumultuous politics in the last years. The time to catch up is now, especially since we cannot blame the absence of a supportive government anymore.

Because we need educated people that can translate available technology into tangible results, it is of primary importance we advance on both fronts, the courses and the implementation of an industrialized production line, at once. We thus entered an alliance with the Institut des Métiers et des Technologies of Tours in France, a European leader in courses in biotechnology. Starting from December 2017, classes will take place in Tunis.

The industrial production lines of biotechnological drugs differ radically from those of any other chemical drug. Sadly, the consequence is that those industrial production lines are extremely underdeveloped in Tunisia today. The required investment will take years and several million euros as well as a specialized expertise from architects and civil engineers, an expertise impossible to find in Tunisia as of yet.

The company cluster occupies a central role in the creation of disruptive innovations, that neither university research bodies nor the industry have the means to discover and launch on their own. This is the reason behind the creation of the cluster of which Ms. Sara Masmoudi, general manager of Teriak, is the president.

Speaking of human resources potential in Tunisia, how would you asses its capacities in entrepreneurship and innovation?

[related_story]

Early on, Tunisia bet on education and invested heavily in its development. As a result, Tunisia stands out amongst the other countries in the region. Nonetheless—and even though I assess positively the potential in the population—we are still facing an important issue of brain drain. Tunisia’s young scientists leave the country, not because of higher wages—although those are also a factor in the equation—but because in Tunisia they do not find the favorable ecosystem for the development of their projects.

Our role has to be to identify those young and passionate researchers and let them know how interested we are in them as well as our dedication to accompany their future here in Tunisia. We do not only pursue a vision of locally produced biotechnology, a vision we all share, we are also committed to provide for our young scientists the necessary support so that they may witness their dreams come true today and not in an uncertain future.

What means are in place to help you achieve your long-term goals?

The area of the BiotechPole presents numerous advantages such as its geographic location in proximity to the airport. Moreover, we are being supported by the government, its president only

recently promised—in front of the parliament—to see to it that there would be a sizeable evolution in high-end technologies by 2020. An important dimension will also be that when conducting long-term projects, we take the time to do things right and not rush the layout of projects doomed to fail when decisive steps are missed.

How can we picture Sidi Thabet BiotechPole's site in five years from now?

In 2020, the BiotechPole will have successfully opened its Technology Research Center (CRT) that will encompass an operational production line and employees that are perfectly able to operate it. The CRT will meet international good manufacturing practices standards and will be equipped in both its construction and installation following an international tender offering. Hence, any drug manufactured within the CRT will undoubtfully be of the highest possible quality.

By 2020 we will also welcome you on a biopark. It will truly be a shared living space that will not only have all the needed infrastructure for technology to develop but a guest house, a restaurant and maybe even a golf course. In addition to the National Center of Sciences and Nuclear Technologies that is already producing contrast agents for radiology on our site we will be hosting many companies in our company hotel.

Our prime objective will of course also in the future be the further development of partnerships and the promotion of Tunisia, our capacities and our ambitions.

What does the future hold for biotechnologies in Tunisia?

The BiotechPole already works in close collaboration with the Institut Pasteur of Tunis, since the first implementation of biotechnologies is to be found in the development of vaccines. The institute already produces biotech vaccines in Tunisia.

Today, all elements guaranteeing success are in place. Notwithstanding the fact that it takes years to develop a biotech drug and that we will have to be patient to see the first launches in Tunisia, the time to plan the future is now, and if we were to fail, we will not be able to make excuses saying opportunities did not present themselves. We have a duty to succeed, for our country, for science and for our future.

I am personally very optimistic, because I believe in science, in technology and in innovation. Our passion is like a virus that has the potential to infect all those who hear of the BiotechPole. We will make them experience how different it is to be a technology maker from a simple technology consumer. We find the required motivation to pursue our goals in the concrete success stories of which we will have more and more to showcase and that will inspire passion to all who will witness

them.

See more interviews