

Interview: Chokri Jeribi - Country Chair, Sanofi Tunisia



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Chokri Jeribi, country chair of Sanofi Tunisia since 2016, is responsible for the development and market leadership hold of Sanofi's affiliate in Tunisia. In this interview he stresses the importance that clinical trials activities for both the company and the country. Additionally, Jeribi documents the unique collaboration system with local laboratories and the technological transfers that result from it. He further explains the combination of the cooperation model and continuous investment strategy in production capabilities has led Sanofi to produce 80 percent of its products sold on the territory in Tunisia.

You have worked for Sanofi for 27 years and were appointed director of the subsidiary of Sanofi Tunisia in 2016. How have you adapted to these new functions and what actions did you first take?

My previous professional experiences have helped me transition smoothly into this new position. I was familiar with the environment and its evolution. Having worked as the medical, regulatory and public affairs director for the past 25 years at Sanofi, my new role as country manager for Sanofi Tunisia was in the continuity of my career.

When I came into office, I picked up on the on-going actions of my predecessor and built an action plan in collaboration with the board of directors. My main responsibility is to ensure the continuous development of Sanofi's affiliate in Tunisia in light of the new environment the affiliate operates in. First, it appeared essential to build a strong sense of purpose among my teams and develop ties between the operational and manufacturing departments. The latter was facilitated because out

production capabilities and operational headquarters share the same site in Tunisia. My work resulted in genuine symbiosis between the production outputs and needs of our operational teams.

Second, as a country manager I took upon myself to reinforce the trust in Sanofi's commitment in the minds of Tunisia's governing authorities. I explained Sanofi's devotion to the country would be unchanged, and that we would live up to the responsibilities of a diversified multinational player. Sanofi wants to remain a partner for the promotion and development of the health landscape in Tunisia by continuously transforming scientific innovations into health solutions

What is Sanofi's position in Tunisia and which activities do you engage in?

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Sanofi Tunisia is the leading pharmaceutical player in Tunisia. We are a dynamic affiliate that relentlessly collaborates with local laboratories to bring innovation and quality products to Tunisians. More specifically 80 percent of the products sold in Tunisia by Sanofi are produced locally. This represents around 32 million units each year and we expect to increase these figures in the coming years.

Sanofi covers both the originators and generic markets with the help of local laboratories for the production of the aforementioned. Our injectable lines and syrups require much higher technological expertise and investments and remain imported. Nonetheless, Sanofi remains a preferred partner for the local laboratories. Our role is not limited to the distribution of drugs but encompasses the accompaniment of patients, medical training, research and contribution to awareness campaigns. Additionally, we are also involved in clinical trials.

Tremendous efforts have also been put into place in terms of corporate social responsibility and environmental issues. For example, we have set up a Health Research prize, which has been running for the past 20 years. Regardless of the difficult times Tunisia faces with its economy Sanofi has continuously invested in the country. The five last years have been home that the investments at a level of 40 million TDN (USD 16.1 million).

How have your production capabilities evolved?

Since 1992, Sanofi has allocated considerable resources to develop our production capabilities, infrastructures and investment. As a result of our investments in the country the production levels of 2017 are up 66 percent in comparison to those of 2010. More recently, Sanofi has built a state-of-the-art distribution centre in Tunisia to help support the affiliate's export activities towards West Africa.

Additionally, in the case of drug manufacturing, our affiliate pushes for technology transfers towards local pharmaceutical laboratories. The latter has required us to coordinate our actions with the central pharmacy of Tunisia (PCT) and has resulted in an unrivalled 80 percent of drugs sold by Sanofi in the country to be produced locally.

Which foreign markets do you export to?

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Our efforts are aligned with Tunisia's governmental vision to increase the export of products manufactured in Tunisia. Our exports currently stand at six percent of the total Tunisian output and we project to export 20 percent of the company's national production by 2020.

Sanofi Tunisia's main exports are focused around West Africa. In parallel Sanofi Tunisia is looking forward to tap into Libya's phenomenal market potential. The affiliate is currently under the process of registering its products and finding the right operational platforms to conduct business efficiently in the country once the political situation will have stabilised.

Which therapeutic areas are currently particularly demanded and which domains do you foresee as the profitable ones in the three to five years to come?

I reckon Tunisia's epidemiological profile will follow that of Europe's. Along with Tunisia's economic development, lifestyle related diseases will become more prevalent than in the past. Demand is categories such as cardiovascular, diabetes, oncology respiratory diseases as well as central nervous system disorders are expected to explode. Since Sanofi is already present in all of these therapeutic domains I consider the diversity of our portfolio to be an asset to continue succeeding in Tunisia.

What actions does Sanofi engage in to promote health in Tunisia?

Innovation is the core of Sanofi's mission across the world. In Tunisia we have just recently launched an innovative hypertension medication. Additionally, we are in the process of registering two oncology drugs, a therapy for multiple sclerosis as well as an additional diabetes product.

Rather than capitalizing on the treatment of these diseases, Sanofi is actively partaking in the development of prevention campaigns, early screenings and vaccination programs across the country. Also, we are contributing to help develop universal healthcare access in Tunisia.

Despite our efforts, the rates of children diagnosed with diabetes are higher than ever. We have launched an analogue insulin dispenser that will help improve the effectiveness of diabetic

treatment. We have found this device provides much safer and more effective results than the previous versions of insulin treatments because it adapts the levels of insulin given to the patient according to his/her present needs.

What makes Sanofi's innovations so successful in the market?

First and foremost, the products Sanofi launches cater to a specific need in the market. They would not be launched in Tunisia or anywhere else in the world if they did not have an improved kinetic profile and proven their tolerance to the patient.

Also, we are particularly attentive to our communication. It is key the medical public is completely familiar with the new molecules we launch to facilitate the marketing of the drug once approved. In this case, we build upon the expertise of our advocates. They have to expertly know about the new molecule as well as its effects in order to convince the doctor community of the benefits of the innovation.

Last, the clinical research centre is a massive differentiating factor for Sanofi. We are amongst the few companies to develop clinical research and trials in the country. Engaging in clinical trials facilitates the drug's marketing because patients are already sensitive to the benefits of the product and so are doctors. To leverage on the clinical research centre, the affiliate has started working in collaboration with the University of Tunis to train the students in clinical trial practices.

Why is Tunisia a favourable environment to conduct clinical research?

There are five main criteria which matter for multinational companies when deciding whether or not to conduct clinical trials in a country. Availability of patients, the cost of conducting research, the regulatory framework, the existence of stable medical institutions and the expertise of people involved in conducting the research. Tunisia has all of that.

First of all, companies conducting clinical trials here have access to an available pool of patients to test the drug. Secondly, Tunisia offers expertise at a significantly lower price than countries in Europe. Thirdly, the regulatory framework is favourable both in terms of testing and marketing, though some adjustments are expected to enable the testing on healthy patients. Then, the private infrastructures in the country are reliable, and the public bodies transparent in terms of market appraisal. Lastly, the investigators are trained in the best universities of the region. I would like to add a sixth point, which is strategic for firms, is Tunisia's geographic location.

Tunisia's regulatory bodies and investment agencies have started to engage in more promotional activities to raise awareness with regards to Tunisia's extraordinary potential for conducting clinical

trial activities. Nonetheless a lot of efforts from Tunisia's private and public sector will have to be put into place before the country can be considered by all as an attractive location to conduct clinical research.

Tunisia should make the development of clinical trials a priority because they are the fastest way of giving patients access to the latest treatments and these activities create economic wealth. The studies generate employment opportunities for highly qualified professionals as most of the technical work is outsourced. Rather than capitalising solely on 40 million TND (USD 16.1 million) exports to develop the pharmaceutical industry in Tunisia, We should be looking at attracting more clinical trials. The clinical research could generate revenues fifteen times larger than that of export activities.

What is Sanofi's role within the public and private dialogue started in 2013?

Sanofi is involved in Tunisia's pharmaceutical industry public private dialogue. Thanks to the World Bank's moderation the private sector's potential is about to be unleashed. Further, the private and public sector's perception of each other have evolved. More specifically the private sector is no longer considered as an individualistic profit oriented industry. Instead the public agents involved in the healthcare industry have understood the tremendous benefits the private sector can bring to Tunisia.

Following the situational diagnosis of Tunisia's pharmaceutical sector multiple reforms have been put into place to help the development of the Tunisian pharmaceutical industry within the Tunisian borders and abroad. These reforms have resulted in reduced appraisal times. Furthermore, favorable regulations for clinical trials are about to be enforced and an action plan to simplify the pricing process has been put into place. This public private dialogue has also worked on rendering Tunisia's supply model of imported medication more sustainable. Both the private and public actors of the pharmaceutical industry will contribute to the financial soundness of our import model in the context of problematic currency devaluation.

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