# Brijesh Sawlani – General Manager North ASEAN (Thailand, Myanmar and Indochina), bioMérieux



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*Brijesh Sawlani, general manager for North ASEAN Thailand, Myanmar and Indochina at bioMérieux, discusses current opportunities for the Thai affiliate, the competitive landscape in Thailand, his key strategic objective to foster long-term growth, and the innovative solutions that bioMérieux is bringing to the country.*

**Having been working for bioMérieux for more than 20 years, could you please introduce yourself and tell us what has kept you at the firm for such a long time?**

After my studies in science, I decided to join the Diagnostics Division of a Pharma Company in the sales and marketing fields, shifting through various positions and promotions in India, South Asia and the Northern cluster of South East Asia.

I arrived at the French family-owned company, bioMérieux, more than 20 years ago. Since its beginnings in 1963, the company, under the auspices of its founder, Mr Alain Mérieux, who had a deep-rooted interest in biology & Public Health, has had a particular character. We had to remain a dedicated player in infectious disease diagnostics. The ambition of the company is PIONEERING DIAGNOSTICS
to improve public health, especially in the fight against infectious diseases, not many companies have this kind of vision. Another strength of the company is our long-term strategy. We decided to

enter the Asia-Pacific market a long time ago at the right time and now we have opportunities everywhere in the region. We are the leader and highly committed player in our field of action.

**In 2016, you were appointed a general manager North ASEAN. Could you give an overview of the region you are heading?**

First of all, I like to call the North ASEAN region the Mekong region because all the countries are connected by the Mekong river from Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Thailand has a unique position within this fantastic region, and the healthcare delivery system is improving. The entire population is covered by at least one of the three health coverage schemes. The quality of care is higher than that of other countries in the region.

Thailand positions itself as a medical tourism hub, more than three million medical tourists come here every year to be treated. At the same time, thanks to the universal healthcare system, the quality of Thai hospitals has improved. The government is working on a new project to develop a smart hospital in Thailand at the Khon Kaen University. We are clearly seeing a lot of effort from the government to improve the healthcare sector.

However, the pharma industry, on the other hand, is having to achieve operational excellence in order to meet the price regulation & expectations of Healthcare Funding Regulators. The industry was forced to make a lot of operational cutbacks and several companies, including MNCs, have had to downsize due to severe pricing pressures. Specialized fields such as IVD & Medical Devices are learning from these changes and preparing for operational excellence and to comply with new procurement policies.

**bioMérieux is increasingly international, with an ever-greater share of revenues generated from outside France. How strategically significant is the Thai affiliate in the region and how has it been performing over the past few years?b**

bioMérieux has two different business verticals: clinical and industry. The industry business is focused on consumer safety in the area of food, pharma, cosmetics and animal health. In this business, the Thai branch has a very strong contribution to overall revenues. Thailand is an important market in this vertical; bioMérieux Thailand has a very unique proposition in pathogen testing for food manufacturers. The country is well-known as the kitchen of the world and exports a lot, which is one of the reasons why we have been so successful here.

In terms of our clinical vertical, we have put in place a new strategy and are carrying out some internal reforms in order to improve the adoption of our automated solutions by leveraging our Medical Education Initiatives. In Thailand, this is just the beginning of the expansion of our clinical operations; we have already had success in the management of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and Sepsis, which are the two main public health challenges for which we have solutions.

The Thai affiliate is celebrating its 20th birthday this year. Since the very beginning, we observed a lot of opportunities in the market. Nowadays, in term of revenue and growth, we do not think of any number below 20 percent. We are underrepresented in some product segments and hence we can grow exponentially in the coming years. In 2013, bioMérieux acquired BioFire, a firm specialized in syndromic testing as part of our acquisition strategy, which has helped us acquire more customers.

**Globally, bioMerieux is not only a world leader in in-vitro diagnostics but also focuses on clinical applications in the areas of infectious diseases, AMR, and cardiovascular emergencies, among others. How is this reflected at the local level? Where do you see your competition coming from?**

Worldwide, we are one of the leading players in vitro diagnostics, and when it comes to infectious disease, we are the leading infectious diseases diagnostics player. Largely our objective is to position ourselves more strongly in AMR, sepsis and consumer safety.

In 2019, bioMérieux will be taking on an additional market share in AMR and Sepsis portfolio, thanks to the acquisition of one of the biggest microbiology sites in Thailand. AMR is one of the biggest problems in Thailand. In this field, the competition is missing, bioMérieux already has a 70 percent market share in the automated segment. We will need to have competition at some point if we want to improve automation awareness and find new automation solutions. With more competition, we will be able to improve on the market development front. At the moment, we are more complementary with our main competitors such as Roche and Abbott. Our positionings are different and sometimes the utility of their solutions starts when the capacities of our solutions end.

**The lack of fertility clinics in China could make Thailand one of the largest reproductive health markets in the world, in line with the US, where the industry generated USD 1.9**

**billion in 2017. Fertility Procedures in Thailand are 35 percent cheaper than Singapore, and 45 percent cheaper than US. How would you asses the readiness of Thailand to take on this opportunity?**

In Thailand, we decided to focus on fertility due to market opportunities. Within our portfolio, we have the Vidas product, which represents a major proportion of our business in India, China, Philippines, Indonesia affiliates, but less than ten percent in Thailand. We had to focus on that and improve this figure. Straight away, we decided to take care of the sales by ourselves, meaning we manage all marketing, investment and services internally. Nowadays we are doing better. We had some breakthrough coming from the product, and from new opportunities

We feel that the Thai market is full of both challenges and opportunities. At bioMérieux, we keep in mind that without challenges, no achievements are possible. The biggest challenge that the company has to face, without taking the market into account, is the hybrid business model. We are working with the customer directly, as well as with various distributors. Our intention is to develop more direct business capabilities and focus on the areas where the market has opportunities, with fertility being one of them.

**Alexandre Mérieux, bioMérieux's chairman and CEO, has highlighted the importance of having an innovation mindset; something that has been handed down from generation to generation to serve global public health. What are your priorities to strengthen the Thai affiliate's innovation capacities?**

Historically, we used to have a diverse portfolio in Thailand across several therapeutic areas. However, for the company to remain a focused player, we had to be more focused on specific fields. We needed to have our basic portfolio at the beginning and be sure that our products were correct. Now we can be focused on innovative products and niches to continue to operate with excellence. We had to adapt and discuss within the company in order to fit into the market and be transitional. Despite being a global solutions provider, we had to find the perfect solution for Thailand. In the short-term, this will help us to gain revenue and in the long-term, we will have a more and more profitable business.

**What kind of partnership opportunities do you want to develop in both the public and private sectors?**

We are working on various initiatives in Thailand focused on medical education. Even if we have seventy percent market share, only thirty percent of people are using our automation. To reach the seventy percent of people who are not using our product, we are partnering with some key associations, such as the Infectious Disease Association of Thailand, to find the right way to educate doctors and scientists to use our product and make the difference in the management of AMR and Sepsis. We are also trying to work closely with the government in AMR. We see that there is a real intention coming from the government to work with the private sector in those fields and improve education.

**bioMérieux Thailand is celebrating its 20th birthday this year. What do you want people to think of when they hear bioMérieux Thailand?**

The company has a strong commitment to Thailand. We really want to continue to push our vision of contributing to improving public health, especially in the fight against infectious diseases. Today, we are helping Thai food exporters with our pathogen testing, we are doing the same in AMR and Sepsis. Often, a patient enters a hospital with one disease but ends up dying because of sepsis. This is why we are bringing solutions in those fields in as complete a way as possible. We want to bring the success of our commercial business across the region.

Within the next five years, we will sustain some of our success and expand in those fields. We are confident in the success of our AMR, Sepsis and Syndromic testing solutions. Thailand is not only a beautiful country; it is also very attractive from the business point of view in healthcare. It is our opportunity to remain as the leading specialized player here. The market is highly undervalued from the outside, but more and more people are entering the sector and we are sure that the industry will become more attractive.

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