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Ali Besri, Pfizer Morocco GM and North Africa Lead reveals the importance of Morocco's stability and assets allowing the country to be recognized internationally for its manufacturing investments and capabilities and highlights how Pfizer has capitalized on this with a footprint in the country for over half a century. Looking to the future, Ali underlines the importance of a favorable market-access environment to progress further and faster and ensure Moroccan patients have access to innovative therapies.

Can you provide an overview of Pfizer's presence in Morocco across your main therapeutic areas?

For over 55 years, we have been delivering life-changing breakthroughs and we continue to invest in improving patient access so that transformative healthcare solutions are available for the people that need them most.

Since 1985, we have supported accelerated access to our portfolio through our local manufacturing plant in El Jadida where 70 percent of our portfolio is locally manufactured. Today, our level of industrial investment is up to 250 million dirhams (more than USD 25 million) and we continue to expand, demonstrating our confidence in Morocco stability and attractiveness.

We directly employ more than 200 people across Manufacturing, Distribution, Medical and Commercial operating in six therapeutic areas of focus: Oncology, Vaccines, Internal Medicine, Rare Diseases, Inflammation & Immunology and Hospital portfolio.

Ali, having previously spent seven years at the Pfizer regional office in Dubai, what surprised you the most about Morocco when you first moved here at the end of 2018?

The Africa Middle East region is extremely diverse in term of market sizes and types. Morocco is medium-sized by regional standards and small on a global scale, but its high growth potential, predictability and stable social and political environment offset relatively limited GDP (ranked 10th in MENA region).

Morocco has been undergoing an ambitious economic and social modernization movement for more than a decade. Key reforms are based on prioritization of the industry, improving business and investment climate and the development of infrastructure. The country's location facilitates access to markets around Europe, Middle East and Africa region and can serve as a strategic hub for foreign companies aiming to operate in Africa. The amended law on public-private partnerships and the advanced regionalization policy offer new investment opportunities.

The healthcare sector in Morocco is undergoing a major overhaul as well, with seven percent growth in pharmaceutical sales (IQVIA). However, universal coverage remains one of the major challenges for local authorities. Less than 40 percent of the population is currently covered by the Compulsory Health Scheme, while the Medical Assistance Regimen (RAMED) is still undergoing major reform.

There is definitely a strong willingness from the Moroccan authorities to harmonize regulatory, pricing and reimbursement processes, switching from sequential to parallel processes. While broadening access to healthcare and medication including innovative therapies for the entire population is today a priority for Moroccan authorities, accelerating processes to update policies, unifying and optimizing the pharmaceutical eco-system efforts are key to achieving this goal.

How do you navigate Morocco's complex market-access landscape?

We have operated in Morocco for a long time and we are accustomed to the local market being a combined healthcare payer: we have a private sector that contributes largely to the ecosystem and what needs to happen is better access, in both the public and the private sectors. This is important for Pfizer as a biopharmaceutical company trying to make innovative products available in the market.

The Moroccan government is facing the challenge of both expanding the healthcare coverage and including innovative products in the reimbursement list. Mandatory health insurance managed by ANAM increased from 15 percent in 2005 to almost 40 percent of the population covered in 2020 with a strong commitment to expanding the scheme to 90 percent of the population by 2025. The government is moving in the right direction to achieve Universal Healthcare coverage by 2030. But the question remains: how can we support to achieve this plan faster? Of course, healthcare budgets are always involved in the discussions, but I strongly believe that public-private partnerships are one of the levers that would help address the current challenges.

Pfizer Morocco has an open dialogue and is partnering with authorities and the key stakeholders to find innovative solutions to increase access for patients.

For instance, we are collaborating within the trade association with authorities to find new innovative funding solutions allowing innovative market access agreements implementation in Morocco and paving the way to new payers's partnerships to ensure patients can benefit from innovative therapies in the future.

I think that the same discussion can be expected at the public level to shift the paradigm from lowest cost to value-based tenders via innovative agreements and making innovative therapies available at public hospital level as well.

How would you assess the importance of Pfizer's manufacturing investments in a market like Morocco?

We have a solid footprint in the country and have been present in Morocco for the last 55 years. Since 1985, we have accelerated access to medication through our local El Jadida manufacturing plant. Every year, we manufacture more than 12 million units to help meet the needs of our patients. More than 70 percent of our medicines are locally manufactured and exported to Tunisia and Sub-Saharan Africa with the highest international quality standards.

We have invested almost 250 million dirhams (more than USD 25 million) into our manufacturing plant and we contribute to the growth of local talents by regularly training future industrial pharmacists through end-of-study internships in our plant. We are proud to be a key partner for the government, in alignment with the strategy to develop local manufacturing.

Morocco is one of the few countries in the region with local manufacturing capabilities and good infrastructure, reflecting the great efforts deployed by local authorities and collaboration between Multinational and local companies. As per a recent study, Morocco has one of the highest local manufacturing rates in the region, almost 80 percent of units's sales in the private sector are locally manufactured. Which is an impressive figure making the country a good model in the region.

How does Pfizer position itself as a partner to the government in addressing major health challenges and how does it align its portfolio to the country's health priorities?

We are proud to deliver a portfolio in full alignment with the Moroccan health authorities's priorities. Today, our products meet the needs of patients in Oncology with targeted therapies that significantly improve quality of life; and in vaccination with two vaccines: Pfizer Anti-pneumococcal vaccine (PCV13) that is adopted in 126 countries in their National Program of Immunization, including 15 out of 17 countries in the Africa and Middle East region. We also deliver anti-meningococcal vaccine that is mainly used to protect pilgrims travelling for Hajj & Umrah.

Our portfolio is also focusing on non-communicable diseases including cardiovascular, pain conditions, urology and psychiatry. On the other hand, Pfizer Morocco addresses the need of patients with rare disease, covering mainly haemophilia and growth hormone disorders with a strong and promising pipeline to cover other diseases in the near future.

We aim to provide the Moroccan patients with the most innovative therapies as quickly as possible. Our decisions and actions are always driven by patient needs, and we collaborate with our partners to implement Access programs to address affordability challenges, and Patient Assistance programs to provide support in disease awareness and management, for instance, we have in place a program called "Min Ajlik" ("For you") that supports around 800 patients in 2020.

What have been your key learnings over the past three weeks of confinement during the COVID-19 outbreak, and how will this change the structure of the local organization in the future?

This is an unprecedented time with great challenges for the communities, the authorities and the economic players. As a company, in order to support global health priorities and contribute to impact patients's lives, you need to have a strong and comprehensive preparedness plan.

This involves protective measures for our colleagues, assessing implications to our patients, in-kind and monetary donations to impacted areas, diligent monitoring of our global supply network and deploying resources – both people and financial – in the race to develop antiviral therapies and coronavirus vaccines.

The other key aspect is the communities' and the company's engagement: Social and economic solidarity are becoming critical to support sustainability for individuals and institutions.

Nevertheless, today we are witnessing a turning point in the way we are operating, and our sustainability very much depends on our ability to implement new ways of interactions: It is all about connectivity and digital transformation.

At a global level, we are strongly involved in Artificial Intelligence to accelerate clinical trials and move quickly between the different phases. Locally, we have invested a lot in digital initiatives to support further our HCPs to receive the right and timely medical information. We also support digitally our patient programs, for example, we recently launched in the area of haemophilia – HemoHeroes, an unbranded game app to support children in this condition to access information regarding lifestyle and disease management guidance. In short, accelerating digital transformation will be a key lever for advances, not just at Pfizer, but across the whole healthcare and life sciences landscape in Morocco.

Lastly, what do you hope to have achieved when we come back to Morocco in five years' time?

A lot! I would like to see universal healthcare coverage in the country, where Moroccan patients can be treated with equity and access innovative therapies. At Pfizer, we are working hard to introduce our innovative solutions to Moroccan patients as soon as it is possible after the global launch.

We will continue to deliver life-changing breakthroughs to improve the patient journey in Morocco with the launch of 12 new therapies in the next 5 years. We commit to continuously collaborate with authorities to develop new payers' partnership and accelerate product reimbursement to enhance patient access to innovation.

As per the last 55 years, Pfizer is committed to supporting the Moroccan authorities and strengthening our partnership with local players to contribute to developing a favourable environment for the healthcare sector's development.

On the other hand, great efforts were initiated by the Pharma industry in partnership with the government regarding biomedical research and I hope to see Morocco in the top 3 countries leading in clinical research in Africa within 5 years.

Pfizer's purpose is "breakthroughs that change patients' lives". We shall continue to put the patient at the centre of everything that we do in the country and to invest in talent development and gender equity to make Pfizer a space for personal and professional growth for our collaborators.

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