

Diego Forero – North Africa Cluster Lead, Pfizer



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As North Africa cluster lead Pfizer veteran Diego Forero heads up Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria in addition to being the country manager for Morocco. He describes the company's 57-year presence and its local manufacturing site that produces almost 70 percent of Pfizer's medicines marketed in Morocco as well as certain exports. He outlines the MoUs the company has embarked on with the Moroccan Ministry of Health around antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and supporting the government's implementation of planned healthcare reforms.

Could you start by introducing yourself to our international audience, the reason you moved to a completely new region, and your current priorities?

After my graduation as a general surgeon, I wanted to become a general manager in the pharmaceutical industry. With that in mind, I aimed to strengthen my academic base through post-graduate studies in marketing, hospital management, and finance reinforced by an MBA. Over the past 25 years, almost 80 percent of my scope has been in regional or global roles. Although I am from Colombia, my experience has been significantly diverse within multiple countries, with roles spanning from heading a regional cluster to working at global headquarters in leadership roles. I have had the opportunity to work in all the therapeutic areas and all the different lifecycle stages of a product, from early pipeline to post-LOE.

This is my second experience leading a cluster, having led the Colombia and Venezuela cluster from 2016 to 2019. Since January 2023, I have been the North Africa cluster lead in charge of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria as well as the country manager for Morocco.

I accepted this challenge, having been intellectually, culturally, and professionally curious about leading a truly diverse cluster with more differences than commonalities in many aspects, regarding healthcare systems, infrastructure, access, and the way the pharmaceutical industry generally operates.

My key priorities within the region are to deliver on our Pfizer purpose, which is to provide breakthroughs that change patients' lives, reaching and covering the needs of as many patients as possible. Similarly, it is important to me to strengthen and enhance the Pfizer culture, values, and develop talent. One of my aspirations is to be able to export talent from North Africa to other regions and to Pfizer's headquarters in New York.

Coming into this region, what have been your first impressions and what differences have you observed?

I have had a remarkably positive impression regarding the people, their culture and history. You cannot miss the extremely generous nature of the people, who are extremely kind, genuine, and hard workers.

From a professional point of view, primarily focusing on Morocco, it is continuously rewarding to see the level of prioritisation that the government is putting in place to provide a better healthcare system and improve equitable access for the Moroccan population through the implementation of universal healthcare coverage.

Our region holds similar challenges to those facing the global industry, perhaps with different complexities. One of the evident and most pronounced challenges is the ability to access necessary resources to support innovation. However, the region boasts excellent academics and healthcare professionals. Yet, progress is still to be made on regulatory pathways, pricing systems, and reimbursement. Still, I am confident that markets like Morocco are embarking in the right direction. We also must not forget the complexity that COVID-19 brought along, creating a backlog in the regulatory processes in several markets, and Morocco is no exception. Nevertheless, the Moroccan Ministry of Health and its representatives are making a huge effort to improve the regulatory pathway, including pricing and reimbursement aspects. We expect to see positive changes starting in 2024.

How would you describe Pfizer's current positioning in Morocco's pharmaceutical sector and the strategic relevance of Morocco to the company?

Pfizer, as a globally leading biotechnology company, with over 174 years of history delivering breakthroughs that change patients' lives, was one of the first multinationals to establish a presence in Morocco and can now look back on 57 successful years in the country. Our manufacturing facility in El Jadida, Morocco was established in 1985. nowadays, Pfizer Morocco has around 220 employees, almost 60 percent of them being women. We pride ourselves on diversity and inclusivity in that sense and diversity within the market.

The full spectrum of Pfizer's portfolio in Morocco varies from fields of prevention with our vaccines, to hospital products, inflammation, immunology, internal medicine, and rare diseases. From the global perspective, Morocco is a growing market, and presents upcoming opportunities with the increase in healthcare coverage, leading to a larger population being covered. We are highly committed to participating in, and contributing to, the development of the healthcare sector and the strengthening of the healthcare system. Pfizer is a company that strongly believe in a future where disease doesn't win but science does. This is why we are partnering with healthcare professionals, governments and healthcare providers to do our best and achieve our ambition to satisfy patient's needs.

Pfizer recently signed two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with the Moroccan Ministry of Health. Can you walk us through these agreements?

We decided to embark on these two MoUs earlier this year, to contribute the best we can to overcome some of the sector's key challenges. The first MoU focuses on the looming health threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). We are looking for projects and programs that can help strengthen the antimicrobial surveillance system, building up capabilities in hospital laboratories, and working with the government to raise awareness of AMR and the correct use of antibiotics through large awareness campaigns.

The second MoU is focused on supporting the government to implement the planned healthcare reforms. This consists of three main pillars: one is about improving the patient journey, how the patient can be diagnosed and the barriers a patient may face in their journey. The second focuses on how we can assist in strengthening the healthcare system per se, covering everything regarding capabilities, training, and solutions within the healthcare systems. The third and final pillar aims on developing ways in which we can improve access to patients through innovative agreements for negotiating, contracting and tailor-made patients support programs.

We are in the process of fine-tuning the main initiatives that we will launch in the next couple of months. It is a long-term commitment signed for the next three years.

Pfizer globally is preparing for an unprecedented number of anticipated new products and indication launches. Are there any of these scheduled to be brought to Morocco?

In Morocco, we are planning to have over ten launches in the next three to five years. These products will be in different therapeutic areas including oncology, vaccines, internal medicine, as well as inflammation and immunology. We also have products for heart disease and cardiomyopathy. Some of these products have already been launched in other markets, so we are catching up. However, I think that the Moroccan government has a good understanding of these challenges regarding the regulatory pathway including approval, pricing and reimbursement process. We also need to be conscious that with this ambitious goal of expanding access to the entire population, there will be a need to look at what it means from a budget point of view. Again, we are working closely with the government for the best way to introduce those products in an accelerated manner.

You mentioned patient access programs, can you share some of the initiatives that Pfizer is engaging in on this front?

It is important to mention that we have four therapeutic areas well supported by patient access programs: oncology, rare diseases, inflammation, and immunology. We have approximately 1700-2000 patients within those programs. An aspect I find very interesting is that we are working at the same pace as the government. In December last year, the government moved almost 30 percent of the uncovered population to be part of the low-income, now-covered population. At that time, we immediately launched two patient access programs to support oncology, inflammation and immunology for these vulnerable populations. We are constantly finding opportunities to mitigate these challenges and allow patients to quickly access medicines that Pfizer has in the portfolio for those areas. It is a combination of finding the right way to support patients whilst considering that patients' needs may vary from aspects such as diagnosis to pure access.

What is your view on Morocco's potential to take on a greater role in improving access to medicines in Africa, especially looking at Pfizer's production capabilities in Morocco?

Currently, almost 70 percent of our marketed medicine are manufactured locally at our production site in El Jadida the site also exports to some west African countries, Mauritius and Tunisia. We export products in different therapeutic areas, mostly solid oral products, but we are constantly analysing how we can further expand our footprint there. One of the critical aspects that we recently embarked on and are currently in operation, is the expansion of our cold room to expand storage capacities and product supply in the market. We have invested a yearly average of USD two million over the last three to five years in the development of the site and are committed to further expansion, with the aim of supporting the introduction of new and innovative products in the years to come.

What are your strategic priorities for Morocco moving forward?

We aim to continue providing support for the government's efforts to strengthen the healthcare system and increase coverage for the Moroccan population, while providing access to the most innovative and relevant therapies. In three years' time, I would like to see that Morocco is no longer falling behind other countries in regards to access to innovation. All of this is to be done in a sustainable manner, jointly with strategic partners at the country level. Finally, I would like to see the people at Pfizer developing and growing and I aim to strengthen Pfizer's culture and values in the organization, to continue delivering breakthrough that change patients' lives.

Having spent 22 years with Pfizer, what keeps you motivated and engaged on a day-to-day basis?

When I joined Pfizer, I had clarity in the four pillars that I wanted to accomplish. The first one was about identifying myself with the culture, the values, and the purpose of the company, I love Pfizer culture, I embrace Pfizer's purpose and it has been even stronger with the recent contributions that we have made to society. The second aspect is the professional and personal growth. I started the interview by saying that my curiosity to learn and to lead intellectually and professionally in a different region brought me here, and I am eager to continue learning. The third aspect is the quality of life. A quote I always follow, and I try to do so with the people I work with, is "performance always, family first". This means that we will deliver on our accountability and on our priorities, by successfully impacting as many patients as we can, but we deeply care about our loved ones and our family at the same time. The fourth and final aspect is financial considerations. Although Pfizer might not be the company that pays the most, it pays fairly indeed. All these four aspects put

together, have given me a good balance to be able to stay at Pfizer almost 22 years, and looking for more to come.

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