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It makes no sense to grow if there is no care for the society that surrounds us

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Saad Kanbris, who has been heading Novartis operations in Morocco, Tunisia & Libya since January 2018, discusses the importance of â??the contextâ?? and temporality while analyzing the improvement and the next steps for the Moroccan market and the region he manages.

After years working for Novartis, this is your first experience as a country manager, now supervising the companyâ??s operations in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. How did you prepare for this challenge?

Nothing can ever fully prepare you for the next steps in life. It is rather a matter of mindset adopted and having someone that believes in your potential. I truly believe that it is the mindset that drives people, reflecting how they look at challenges but also how they connect these challenges to their purpose. It is closely related to the fear and willingness to venture into something new.

Furthermore, it is closely linked to the support, mentorship and inspiration of the people you surround yourself with. Indeed, if someone believes in you and your potential, why should you shy away from it? These people that you surround yourself with fuel you with courage to take the next steps.

You took over the operations two and a half years ago. What have been your key learnings on the three markets and their dynamics?

Although I was only appointed managing director for the three countries in January 2018, from my previous roles in the MENA region for Novartis, I already had some insight and understanding of the three markets. That being said, it is not because some countries share the same language that they are similar. Cultures are always different and unique. When reaching a country at first, it is crucial to get out there to sense the place and to have a feeling of the people and culture. It enables to have a better vision and understanding of the business and relations amongst people. It can be easy to get distracted with the wrong information and focus on the wrong place; what really matters is to filter out in order to define clearly the focus but also understand the time and consequently, the timing.

What have been the key decisions that you implemented when joining Moroccoâ??s affiliate?

When I arrived in this position, we had decided to change the approach. We gathered with the local organization leadership team for a full week offsite in order to engage in a fruitful and deep discussion to reflect about the future, to define together what unified us but also our purpose and how we can translate it into our business.

We decided to further strengthen our partnerships in Morocco and to refocus Novartis as a company of innovation. This reflection led not just to a vision and strategy, but to a dream that each of my team members embraces everyday: â??Together, we grow, transform and impact livesâ?•.

From there on, everything accelerated. In the MEA region, we disinvested some products to our local partners, we launched five new innovative products: UperioÂ®, CosentyxÂ®, JadenuÂ®, JakaviÂ® and KisqaliÂ®, always with this underlying idea that to transform and impact lives, we need to bring innovative treatments to the patients and show the value of our innovations.

Also, growth should not only stand for Novartis; we aim to grow Novartis, Novartisâ?? associates and society at large. It makes no sense to grow if there is no care for the society that surrounds us. In this sense, we have launched the first emerging market brand in the MEA region which was key. At Novartis, we deeply believe that all patients should have access to innovative treatments, and price should not be a hurdle. Emerging market brand strategy allows us to wider the access to our innovation by proposing more accessible prices in emerging countries.

Novartis is recognized as a company very much at the forefront of innovation. How do you feel this is perceived in Morocco?

The context in which we were and are operating is crucial, it is evolving but it needed to be considered to define if the lessons of the past have been learned.

Over the last five years, a lot of things have changed in the Moroccan context, and some may question whether innovation is actually welcomed here, following the strict measures that were implemented and the price cuts introduced by the authorities. But local authorities are putting a lot of efforts to catch up. It is visible for example in the timeline to bring innovation to market nowadays compared to a few years ago. Today, we have a very advanced regulatory framework about data protection and the process of registration is clearly timed. These are factors that impact our ability to bring innovation to market. Furthermore, the limitations are understood by the authorities which leads to discussions amongst the actors. Nevertheless, the key aspect is not to bring the product on

the market, but first and foremost, to be able to bring the product to the end user, to the patient.

How strategic is Morocco for Novartis in the MEA region?

Morocco is a hub within the MEA region, which is itself very strategic and Morocco is the country with the most stable political but also economic situation. In addition to these crucial points, the government has undertaken initiatives, a key strategic vision, to step by step develop the country. Taken these into account and the fact that all market signs are positive, there is no reason not to be present in Morocco, and we should be comfortable bringing innovation to the country.

The footprint that Novartis has in Morocco was set years ago. As a matter of fact, the company has accompanied the development of the country and helped establishing local manufacturing via technology and knowledge transfers to our partners. While we produce less than we used to in Morocco, following a global divestment, we now focus on bringing innovation & increasing our manufacturing volumes. We also try and work on what the country needs today, and that for example includes clinical trials.

Novartis has a product portfolio amongst the most innovative in the industry, but also one of the priciest. How adapted is this offer to the Moroccan market?

Yes, Novartis has one of the richest pipelines in the world. In the next ten years, there will be over 44 new innovations. The issue lies on our ability to bring those drugs to the patient and that they have access to these innovations. There are several actions and initiatives to which we can engage in order to bring innovation to the Moroccan market. For instance, launching an emerging market brand was one of them.

We have organized several workgroups and made propositions with the LEMM (Les Entreprises du MÃ©dicament au Maroc) to share innovation contracting possibilities with authorities, so they can decide what best suits their needs. Our goal is to find innovative funding solutions for novel treatments and see how innovative companies can accommodate within the regulations and then hopefully, open the discussion on upgrading the ongoing regulation and accommodate on innovative ways of pricing. This groundwork is a necessity if we are to bring technologies such as cell & gene therapies for example.

Regarding results, how have been the past years for Novartis in the markets under your responsibilities?

Numbers and results are important, especially when you take over a country to understand the situation. Yet I somehow try to move the conversation away from â??just looking at the resultsâ??, as numbers are the natural consequence of the work produced. They of course remain crucial KPIs to pause and assess the situation at a precise moment, but I believe that if you are focused on your mission and vision, then the numbers will follow.

Over the last years, the results have been very satisfying, following the expectation and even exceeding the expectations last year, with double digit growth in the region. As for the moment, the situation of Covid19 is difficult to assess, but we continue to focus on doing the right things today.

What has been your approach to Libya which as everyone knows is experimenting a horrible situation?

Libya has indeed been in a very difficult situation these last years. Yet, what really matters is to answer the following questions: are there patients living there, in need of treatments and medicines? And secondly, is it our duty and purpose to secure access to essential treatments for these people? The answer for Novartis has been yes. This is why we believe we must continue to deliver on our responsibilities in the country.

In the recent years, the market has been very challenging, we are changing our operational footprint in Libya in order to ensure that Libyan patients still have access to essential medicines. We are working to find the right platform with the authorities, to make sure the medicines are reaching the right hands and the right patients in the most ethical way, making sure our business does not fuel unlawful groups or goals. We have been able to do so without danger for patients, for society but also for the reputation of Novartis.

Through your background, you have become an expert of product launch. If you were to give advice on good product launch, what would it be?

In order to have a successful product launch, it is crucial to have a coherent story. Generally, people launch a product because they either have a focus on the product or a premade idea in their mind. Nevertheless, when compared to the market and the reality, there is a disconnection that can often lead to failure. To successfully launch a product, there is a need of going into the market, to feel it and understand it while understanding the product. It is crucial to visualize the story about the launch and its impact.

There was a couple of key launches in the past years for Novartis, amongst which Cosentyx. As a matter of fact, we have seen impressive results for the launch of Cosentyx, successfully beating the market benchmark of any other product launched before the reimbursement in place. It is for us, a clear sign of confidence in the product and in the organization. I hope that these successful launches demonstrate the potential of Morocco, and that many more patients will be able to benefit from these products as we are working to tackle the issue of reimbursement that has been a challenge in Morocco lately.

The entire management culture has been evolving for Novartis with the introduction of concepts such as *unbossed. H*ow are you driving these changes and how have they been implemented in your teams?

In the last couple of years, we have seen tremendous transformation, and it continues. In the next few months, our offices of Morocco will be moved, and our offices will embrace the idea of unboss, unity, conversation and overall, the culture that spreads in Novartis. In other words, it provides us with an umbrella to engage with people in conversation. If you want people to reach their full potential, it is important not to avoid it by bossing around.

It has been a pleasure to see everyone embracing this new culture. At Novartis, there is a core belief in human and human potential overall, a belief that diversity brings uniqueness, and that everyone has something to bring to the business. This is emphasized through our culture.

I was not surprised by the embracement of this cultural change amongst the company, I know that there is a need to put time and effort to earn peopleâ??s trust before introducing change, as when there is no trust, it is complex to impulse something new. So overall, I was not surprised with the success related to this cultural shift within Novartis, but I would say I was surprised by the pace to which it was successful and the positive reaction. I am always happy to have my expectation beaten!

How different would you like Novartis to be two years from now in the region you cover?

Over the last years, the market has been changing, with challenges related to the economy for instance. The main inspiration is that it stabilizes for the best of the country, but also for the people and the business so it can flourish. Indeed, I hope that the next couple of years will bring an acceleration of the reimbursement system and expand the healthcare coverage in order to provide patients with innovative treatments. On this point, there is a role we can play in helping and supporting authorities to expand and accelerate access to innovative medicine in the country.

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