Lamia Tazi – Chairwoman of the Board & CEO, Sothema



Sothema is looking ahead by expanding our footprint geographically, broadening our portfolio and investing in innovative technologies

26.09.2023

Tags: Morocco, MEA, MENA, Sothema

Lamia Tazi, chairwoman of the board and CEO of Sothema and VP of the Moroccan Federation of the Pharmaceutical Industry (FMIIP), walks us through the over 40-year-old family-owned Moroccan company's heritage as well as some of its recent advances such as the launch of its own range of oncology treatments. She also discusses Sothema's ambitious plans for expansion that include enlarging its portfolio of generics and biosimilars as well as medical devices and expanding its geographical footprint beyond Morocco through acquisitions in East Africa and the Gulf.

Could you start by briefly introducing yourself as well as Sothema to our international audience?

I am Chairwoman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Sothema, a leading pharmaceutical company in Morocco and one of the important pharmaceutical companies in Africa and the Middle East. After graduating in pharmacy from the University of Liege in Belgium, I joined Sothema and was ultimately promoted to occupy my current role.

Sothema has evolved from a medium-sized firm to become the country’s number one pharmaceutical company and our turnover has multiplied by more than six times. As an illustration of this growth, in the most recent ranking of the top 500 Moroccan companies, Sothema has climbed from the 165th position to the 57th. I can proudly say that I contributed significantly to expanding the business, especially in the international market by developing its contract

manufacturing activities and the Big Pharma portfolio we now serve.

I also helped put Sothema in the spotlight both nationally and internationally by entering some promising niches such as biotherapeutics, clinical studies, and vaccines, among others. In addition, I spearheaded Sothema's transformation into a modern organisation with new procedures and rules, and a focus on innovation, technology, and digitalisation.

You also serve as VP of the Moroccan Federation of the Pharmaceutical Industry (FMIIP). What are your key agenda items and advocacy priorities within that role?

My key priority as VP of the FMIIP is to defend the interests of our industry. In recent years, the overall healthcare sector has become unpredictable, complex, and highly regulated. Today, it is much riskier to invest in the pharmaceutical sector than it was decades ago.

My second priority is to make sure that our federation stands united and speaks the same voice. The pharmaceutical industry is quite broad in Morocco, encompassing local family businesses to large multinationals as well as genetics and biotechnology players, therefore, it is not easy to bring all interests together and work towards a common goal, but we are committed to doing that.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we proved that our industry is vital not just to the health system but also to the economy. Contributing to addressing the most pressing health issues (including pandemics) by providing necessary treatments has become a national security matter and in that, a strong domestic pharmaceutical industry plays a key role. Today, our industry is fully committed to helping Morocco reach its sovereignty in terms of the domestic manufacturing of medicines and medical devices.

How has Sothema evolved throughout the years, and where does the company stand today?

Sothema is a family-owned company that was established in 1976 by my father who had the vision of manufacturing lifesaving, added-value products in Morocco.

Since the beginning, Sothema has made a clear choice by partnering with leading pharmaceutical companies known for pioneering R&D in almost all existing therapeutic areas. Through these partnerships, we were able to benefit from technology transfer. These partnerships enabled us 15 years ago to start producing our own range of products, both chemical and biotechnological.

Thanks to our international partners, we were able to remain, until today, the only producer of certain medicines such as insulin, heparins, and monoclonal antibodies. We are also the leader in manufacturing in an aseptic environment. In 2023, 50 products in our range are from our own portfolio, with 20 to 30 being innovative biotechnology treatments.

We are a national company that is focused on the autonomy of medicines and have recently launched our own range of oncology treatments that are manufactured locally, which guarantees supply to the local market at a competitive price while ensuring world-class quality. In fact, data shows that through our oncology biosimilars, we are reaching six times more patients than the products from Big Pharma had in the past, meaning that we are delivering the same quality at a fraction of the cost. This is adding more value to patients and lowering the net spend of the government so they can spend more in other areas of healthcare.

How will Sothema's portfolio evolve and what type of therapeutics are you now looking into?

Right now, we have around 100 new products in our pipeline. They range from original molecules to generics, biosimilars, and medical devices. In the long term, we are working toward expanding our portfolio by investing in new sectors such as cannabis and medicinal herbs. In line with our development strategy, we are targeting the sector of medical devices which is currently dominated by imports, both through acquisitions and via the implementation of local manufacturing capabilities.

Sothema played a key role during the COVID-19 pandemic in securing the supply of vaccines to Morocco and was involved in the preliminary clinical tests for Sinopharm's anti-COVID vaccines. Can you talk us through this experience and how the company has changed post-pandemic?

It was both challenging and exciting. We had the opportunity to serve our country by contributing to its preparedness against an unprecedented pandemic. As you mentioned, we were invited by our Ministry of Health to help implement the first clinical study for Sinopharm's anti-COVID vaccines thanks to our past experience in handling a clinical study for the first monoclonal antibodies manufactured in Morocco. We learned priceless lessons from this experience. One of them is our ability to take part in the international market of clinical studies dominated by Western

countries. Morocco can definitely enter this market as a service provider since we have both the regulations and new infrastructure that is under development. I truly believe that Morocco has a great potential to be a hub for clinical trials in Africa.

During the pandemic, Sothema has proved that it is an agile company capable of dealing with new sets of challenges, including the disruption of the supply chain and the new guidelines for work safety. Despite enormous pressure put on our industrial units that worked at full capacity and without stoppages during the pandemic, we managed to deliver every single order from our customers, including those of our Ministry of Health. The experience changed us for the better. Post-pandemic, Sothema is more reactive than ever before.

You already export to Europe, the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Persian Gulf, with several international development projects. How would you define your international expansion strategy, as well as your ambitions for international expansion and growth?

International expansion is a priority. We are putting a lot of energy and means into making our products available in the largest number of markets. According to our strategy, we target new markets that have a high potential for growth, including the emerging markets of eastern Africa. Whether through exports, acquisitions of local companies, or the implantation of subsidiaries, our focus is to understand the demands and to answer them adequately. In all the markets, our chief challenge is with registration. The regulations are more complex, and they are slowing the process of launching new medicines. That is why, we are investing in improving our time to market. We are now present in West African countries and some Gulf nations such as the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. We are not exporting to Europe but are conducting contract manufacturing activities for international players in Morocco.

Moving forward where are you looking to expand the company’s reach?

We have a production site in Dakar, offices in the Ivory Coast and Cameroon, and are looking to be larger African players by expanding into East and South Africa. In 2023 it is a challenge to take a product, register and sell it as the market is very competitive. As a result, we are looking more towards acquisitions in East Africa, the Gulf nations and perhaps Europe. This is very different for us as we have for 40 years been focused on purely organic growth, but we believe this is a

necessary step to accelerate our trajectory.

Expanding geographically will require a strong portfolio, and currently we have 100 products in the pipeline based around pure generics and biosimilars. Innovation is within our DNA, and we see that the future of healthcare is in areas like AI, so we are investing in European start-ups focused on these innovative technologies. Furthermore, during COVID-19, the government was promoting disposables and we therefore invested and now have a 40 percent stake in a medical device company focused on products such as syringes and masks.

Sothema also values the importance of local research and is sponsoring researchers. We recently had a good experience with a local scientist who won awards on the international stage.

In conclusion, Sothema is looking ahead by expanding our footprint geographically, broadening our portfolio and investing in innovative technologies.

What do you see as the most impactful trends in the Moroccan market today?

The most impactful trend in the Moroccan market is definitely the national project of expanding social protection which will benefit 22 million uninsured Moroccans. This will boost the demand for medicines which is today estimated at an average of 40 USD per inhabitant per year. This huge project will also translate into major investments, generating more added value and creating thousands of jobs.

You have been nominated among the top 50 Leaders in the MENA region by Forbes, the only leader in Morocco, and one of only five women. What would be your message to young female leaders in the region that are looking to succeed?

They must first build faith in themselves. This starts by knowing their strengths. Self-awareness is the first skill that every leader should have. They must also love what they do. Passion is the secret of longevity and resilience in high-level careers.

See more interviews