Ralf Halbach – General Manager, Roche Morocco and Head of Management Center Northwest Africa



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Ralf Halbach discusses the impact of low health coverage in Morocco on Roche's strategy, and the fact that the company chose Morocco as the country to locate its northwest Africa management center.

You have been the head of Roche's northwest Africa management center , as well as the general manager for Morocco, since January 2014. What brought you here, and what has been your mandate since then?

It was the exciting possibility of working in an emerging market with enormous potential that brought me to this region, where, unfortunately, our important medicines in cancer and hepatitis, for example, are not widely accessible. This is a constant challenge for us, and improving access to our life-changing medicines is a key part of our strategy. We need to ensure that the people here understand and appreciate the value of our products as well as their necessity. We are trying to change the way we operate within emerging markets by jointly developing with partners innovative, sustainable ways to bring effective and affordable healthcare to people and improve health outcomes.. For us, our goal is very clear: we want to become the most respected healthcare partner in the region. This goal drives the way we approach the market.

Health coverage in Morocco is low. As a company that sells highly innovative and expensive drugs, how do you plan on maximizing the opportunities available in the country and the region?

I would say that how we make our drugs accessible to the larger population is the most important aspect of our strategy. We are aiming for sustainable access, because of course, short-term access is extremely easy. But slashing prices will only work temporarily so we are looking for better, more sustainable options to improving access to our drugs. It has to be sustainable to us—we need to sustain the research and development of new innovative drugs—and it has to be sustainable for the environment and infrastructure as a whole. There are many elements to developing a sustainable and stable market and we are working very diligently on this. Preventative medicine and procedures are also on our agenda. It's a huge challenge in this region, and it must be accomplished step by step.

One of Roche's main strengths in the region is a focus on oncology. How does Roche as a company plan on rising to the challenge of other growing companies in the oncology sector in this region?

I don't see this as a challenge. I see it as a positive phenomenon where other companies invest in the market, which helps encourage government, doctors and patients to realize the importance of oncology. In Morocco, only 30 to 60 percent of the population have access to drugs, and even less have access to oncology drugs, which means that there still is a lot of work to do to improve this situation. It can only be a good thing that we have more companies making sure that there are drugs available for oncology patients. This will then, of course, help raise the awareness of the importance to adequately treat oncology patients. We are not only talking about oncology drugs, but also preventative measures and education around this devastating disease. I see these growing companies as partners investing in oncology for Moroccans.

One of Morocco's main strength is its large pool of educated and talented graduates in the medicine sector. What still needs to be improved upon to further develop the market?

I think that we still need to work on developing our local talent even further. It's true that there is a significant amount of people who have medical degrees and good experience locally, but I think there is still a lot of untapped potential. Hopefully, within the next few years we will begin to see universal health coverage in Morocco, which will, of course, then enlarge the market further. So, yes, there are some very well trained graduates here, but this needs to be continued even further.

Algerian growth rates are near 50 percent within the region. Does the rise of Algeria threaten the potential of Morocco being the hub of activities in the region?

Regarding where the headquarters are located for this region, there are many factors that drive this decision. It is true that Algeria is the biggest market in the region that has been growing at record rates and still has a lot of potential. But when choosing the best location of the regional hub, you need to take a holistic view.

A number of factors play a critical role, including for example, ease of doing business, ability to getting work permits, overall safety, and access to talent.

Right now, Morocco is the hub for our Roche Management Center Northwest Africa. I think that Morocco certainly has the potential to become a regional hub for other companies and sectors as well; however, it needs to take action to change certain aspects. There are currently negotiations happening with the European Union regarding trade, which could be very beneficial for Morocco on many levels. It would be a great opportunity to get Morocco to the next step in its development. With the stability that Morocco offers, and the fact that many companies are already represented here, plus its connection with Europe and Africa, Morocco is a privileged potential hub. But Morocco must take a more long-term view and not a short-term, protectionist view.

What are the main skills that you've gained from being the Northwest African Head, and what are the main characteristics that make Moroccans different to others?

Having had management roles in Europe and in the United States, this is my first emerging market experience so in general it's been a huge learning experience. Dealing with this type of market — in a less predictable environment where there is less available data — is challenging. However, this unpredictability also forces you to become more flexible and more agile. In an emerging market, you need to have a long-term vision of where you want to go and what you want to achieve, but you also have to act according to the frequent and sudden changes in the environment in the short term. Working in this type of environment really keeps you on your toes.

Africa as a whole is certainly an area where we can make a difference for people who can benefit from medicines. Hopefully, within the next five to ten years, we will see enormous growth in this sector as the population continues to increase. There is a growing middle class, increasing stability, and the potential to be a highly attractive market, which is very exciting to partake in. We at Roche are very proud to be here and to participate in the development of the sector as well as the region as a whole.

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