COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP:  
SUCCESES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Role of the Tunisian Export Promotion Centre in 
Coordinating the Partnership with the Private Sector

A COUNTRY PAPER 
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The challenges of globalisation and liberalization require for developing countries the implementation of national export strategies based on real interaction and intensive cooperation between private and public sector, in order to ensure best chances for the development of the competitiveness of their economy.

In this respect, it is important that the public sector which is generally represented by a National Trade Promotion Organisation, in coordination with all structures and professional bodies involved in trade promotion, set up the global frame-work of general trade policy that should define the objectives and the role of each part concerned by this issue as well as mechanisms of evaluation of these policies.

The experience of the Tunisian Export Promotion Centre regarding the partnership with the private sector since its creation in 1973, has been undergoing progressive changing processes that were adapted to the economic situation of the country and that can be summarized in two main phases:

**The supervision phase:** Until the middle of the eighties, the Tunisian economy was based on import substitution policy that provides high protection to the local industries impeaching companies competitiveness development; During that period “Le Centre de Promotion des Exportations” (CEPEX), has played a major role in managing and supervising the export strategy by setting up the rules and instruments aiming at enhancing export potential of the companies. The role of the private sector in the conception of this strategy at that period was diminished and not clearly apparent and well defined in the trade policy chosen.

This situation, due to the infancy stage of the industry and the lack of experience in the field of internationalisation, has shown certain limits after a certain period of time illustrated by the inability of the export strategy to fulfil a number of the private sector requirements and needs to promote their exports.

**Accompaniment phase:** With the development of private sector export abilities and their gaining of maturity, deep changing has progressively occurred in the interaction between CEPEX, and the private sector.

This changing was expressed at the highest level of the country's authorities and concerned numerous programmes and measures introduced to create a real platform of cooperation and enhance synergy between CEPEX and private sector, aiming at reinforcing the Tunisian export sector competitiveness.

The creation in April 1997, of the Higher Council of Export and Investment (CSEI), which is chaired by the President of the Republic and in which the private sector is fully represented, was a concrete illustration of this approach. The main mission of this Council is to:

- set up the export strategy and the objectives;
- adopt and implement the necessary measures for the achievement of the laid down objectives; and
- evaluate and follow-up the results of exports and investment sectors.

The new programmes and measures give the private sector the entire responsibility to play an effective role in the contribution of the implementation of the national export strategies.

UTICA (The Tunisian Union for Industry, and Handicrafts), UTAP (The Tunisian Union for Agriculture and Fisheries), the two major bodies representing the private sector in Tunisia are entirely concerned and engaged in the definition of the export strategy components.

This implication is expressed through their effective presence as permanent member in different structures involved in trade promotion among which:
• The Administration Board of CEPEX that discusses and validates all proposals and programmes issued by CEPEX.

• The Trade Fairs Committee that elaborates the programme of trade fairs and promotional events to be organized abroad and in Tunisia.

• The Sectoral and Technical Committees in charge of setting up specific exporting strategies concerning a branch of activity or geographical area.

This interaction between CEPEX and the private sector has permitted continuous export performance improvement of the country, which has reached a respectable level.

Furthermore, the involvement of the private sector in the trade promotion activities is also seen through the organizational structure of their representative bodies. UTICA for instance, besides a technical Department of International Relations in charge of promoting partnership with foreign partners, has established a National Federation of Export (FEDEX), which main mission, is to set up export promotion programmes contributing to the implementation of national export strategy.

Among the other measures taken to reinforce the partnership between public and private sector and enhance the competitiveness of the export sector, was the creation of “the Tunisian Export Exchange”, a building regrouping all parties involved in export, which include CEPEX, UTICA, UTAP and the Exporters Club (CET), and providing necessary services and facilities to exporters.

In addition to the exhibition and conference facilities, this innovative infrastructure houses a **One Stop Shop** offering to exporters information and facilitation services of customs authorities, Central Bank, trade, transport, telecommunications and insurance.

Recently, within the framework of its constant efforts of adaptation to the international economic changing and Tunisian private sector’ needs, CEPEX has started undertaking further changes with regard to its approach and organization.

This new redeployment is based essentially on the “demand and customer satisfaction approach” focussing on providing services that fulfil the real needs of the private sector rather than general services offered to exporters.

“Quality of services offered” is also one of the main strategic axes of this new approach, which allowed CEPEX to obtain the certification ISO 9001, version 2000 in December 2003.

Integration of the new technologies and companies’ human resources development are also new tools introduced in CEPEX’s strategy aiming at enhancing private sector competitiveness.

**Lessons learned through this experience**

• Export strategies cannot be successful without the involvement of the private sector.

• Evaluation and re-adaptation of policies are essential instruments allowing a TPO to maintain the development of real assistance provided to the export sector.

• Export strategies should focus on enhancing export abilities of companies and should be global integrating all aspects of the export value chain (production, transport, financing, marketing etc).