

## **How can TPOS react and get ready for a sudden change?**

### **Lessons learned from TUNISIA EXPORT experience in facing the post- revolution political and business environment?**

Presented by  
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Mr President

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm particularly honoured to have this privilege and opportunity to address this eminent gathering of experts attending this unique world conference of TPO Network.

First of all, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to the organisers of this conference and in particular the International Trade Centre in Geneva and MATRADE in Kuala Lumpur.

As you may know, Tunisia is a small country in the Northern part of the African Continent. Tunisia, land of the City of Cartage, historically known as a trading nation and taking advantage of its location in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, is one to two hours flight away from any major European city.

For more than 20 years, between the end of the 80s and 2010, Tunisia has a sustainable yearly average growth rate of around 5%. The country was the first South Mediterranean partner to sign a free trade agreement with the European

Union in 1995. The orientation for an open economy managed by market mechanism was clearly confirmed.

Moreover, a wide range of investment opportunities was offered to the International business community. 3000 foreign companies trust in Tunisia and invest in industrial and services activities oriented to the international market.

In 2010, the export oriented industry performed an increase of more than 20% in high added value sectors such as agri-business, mechanicals, electrical and textile products.

Unexpectedly, and within less than one month, exactly between December 17<sup>th</sup> and January 14<sup>th</sup> 2011, something exceptional happened.

The dictatorship regime running the country for more than 23 years had fallen within hours. The country was left to itself. It was a unique, fast and soft revolution.

A post revolution era began including its uncertainties, cautiousness, instability, social claims and financial tensions.

In the meantime, the country was looking forward to optimism and enthusiasm for a better future taking advantage from the democratic, transparent and participative government.

A dynamic civil society has risen thanks to NGO initiatives, self organisation, and spontaneous reactivity.

For CEPEX, it was clear that we had to face an “emergency situation” with an unpredictable kit of political, economic and social difficulties.

### **What and How to do to support the Tunisian companies in that case?**

CEPEX was created in 1973. It has a large experience in facing difficulties related to economic crisis. But this time, CEPEX has to reinvest specific tools for an extraordinary situation.

Tunisian business community still recognises that CEPEX was the most reactive Government Agency. A clear message was sent to the companies on Tuesday January 18<sup>th</sup>. “If you have any difficulty CEPEX is willing to help you. A 24 hours hot line providing a listening service to exporters was launched”. All members of Tunisia Export team were requested to call one by one the major companies and to make sure that they are in a position, to respect their commitment, towards their clients.

On the meantime, CEPEX has launched the new service named “CEPEX at home” designed to offer a professional visit to the company and to try to explain who we are and what we can offer to them.

CEPEX intensifies its communication on its agenda for export promotion activities. A close coordination with the representatives of the professional sector was put in place.

Finally CEPEX decided to go to the regions and to have a better understanding of the needs of small and medium exporters. At the end 2012, we have registered some encouraging results:

- Export increased by 9.3%
- Tunisian exports registered an increase to 79 destinations including our major trade partners (France, Italy, Germany...)
- The geographical structure of exports was improved
  - 1) +11.3% toward EU
  - 2) +1.7% to Arab Maghreb Union countries
  - 3) +42.2 % to African and Central American countries
- Tunisia achieved a trade surplus with 71 countries.

**20 months after the January 14<sup>th</sup>, what are the major lessons we learn from this exceptional experience?**

- 1- It's extremely important to keep listening to the companies and to diversify and maintain channels of communication.

In the days following the January 14<sup>th</sup>, export oriented companies had to face many problems on the same time: strikes in port, airport, customs services, rapid post, social demand.

It was crucial for those companies to feel that they were not left alone.

CEPEX, a Government Agency was there, supporting them and finding solutions on the base of "case by case".

- 2- It is very important to create confident links on a daily contact basis with the whole institutional network supporting the companies and in particular export oriented companies. CEPEX showed an extraordinary voluntarism to communicate and to share information about the post revolution situation with sister agencies such as FIPA ( Foreign

Investment Promotion Agency), API ( Industry Promotion Agency), APIA ( Agriculture Investment Promotion Agency) and the representatives of the employees such as UTICA, CONNECT.

- 3- It's highly recommended to maintain a high level of sustainable communication inside CEPEX to keep awareness and high motivation to face the difficulties and outside towards the clients and the partners of Tunisian companies.

We took the initiative in early February 2011, to take advantage of the Tunisian participation in a textile exhibition in Paris to send a message to our clients and partners: *“ Don't worry we have some difficulties but the situation is under control. We are managing it and we will be able to fully respect our engagement”*.

I would like to underline that the communication has to be authentic, true and right in time. There is no reason to hide the truth and to dissimulate real difficulties. It will be even worst and counter productive.

- 4- A trade promotion organisation like CEPEX has a major responsibility in organising and in facilitating the participation of Tunisian companies in international events.

It was vital for my country that after the revolution, CEPEX confirms strongly that Tunisia will be actively participating in international event exhibitions. We were in YOSU, we had a large participation in Anuga. The jasmine revolution offers for Tunisia many new opportunities to be present and visible at the international level. CEPEX has managed to

execute the annual program for Tunisia participation in international events. In addition, CEPEX welcomes the invitation for Tunisia to be guest of honour country in the international fair of Geneva, to organise a specific “Jasmin Village” in front of the city of Paris, showing the richness of the Tunisian culture and civilisation.

We decided not to miss any opportunities to show to our partners that the country is working. We also organised in time the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of Texmed and we hosted more than 500 international visitors to the Mediterranean Exhibition.

5- We are aware that the situation created by the transitional period after the 14<sup>th</sup> of January is difficult. It's honestly not easy to think about the future because there is a kind of “wait and see” situation in all fields. But, we decide with our team, our partners and the representatives of the export oriented companies not to dismiss, to be positive and to prepare the future.

Since February 2011, many strategic thinking teams were put in place. An agenda for major structural reforms was implemented in close coordination with private professional sector. A new program designed for new exporters was launched.

Today CEPEX has to handle in a best way with the best value the needs of its economic environment in general and the needs of the exporters in particular. We have to redesign our organisation. We have to reinvent our governance model. We have to build a new strategy for the next five years. We have to expand our national and international network. We have to build a performing information system and to look for the best alternatives for encouraging the

public and the private partnership. This is why our team shows a strong motivation to learn from TPO in Europe, in Asia and in Latin America. Before I left Tunisia, I had an interesting review meeting with a Senior Expert for International Trade Center in Genova, who is helping us implementing the strategic tools to prepare the future, adopting a benchmark approach. We receive many high level delegates from USA, from Europe, from Asia and we are very optimistic about the future.

Thank you for your attention.