

Report on Workshop on Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Rabat, May 21st and 22nd, 2024



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive Summary

On May 21st and 22nd 2024, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, the Embassy of Sweden in Rabat, and the Swedish Institute (SI) arranged a two-day workshop on entrepreneurship and innovation in Rabat, Morocco. Participants represented different parts of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the MENA region, (from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia) and from Sweden, including entrepreneurs from the MENA diaspora living in Sweden. Some of the participants were alumni from the Swedish Institute's *'She Entrepreneurs Leadership Program'*.

The aim of the workshop was on one hand to provide a platform for networking, mutual learning, and inspiration amongst the participants, and on the other hand a chance to explore potential new areas of collaboration across sectors and amongst entrepreneurs from the MENA region and Sweden. A further aim was to explore how private sector representatives can contribute to enhancing the dialogue between the MENA region and Europe.

The programme encompassed presentations, workshops, a study visit to StartUp Maroc, and roundtable discussions, including one on public-private partnerships with representatives from The World Bank, European Investment Bank (EIB), International Labour Organization and CGEM.

Discussions focused on exchanges on knowledge, experience and best practices related to entrepreneurship and innovation. Participants shared reflections and recommendations. They saw good potential in engaging the private sector, not least representatives from the diaspora, more in creation connections and facilitating relations between the regions and appreciated the role of the Dialogue Institute as a platform for exchange both amongst entrepreneurs and between entrepreneurs and representatives of other sectors in society.

Main take-aways

- Dialogue between entrepreneurs can play a role in driving positive change and in finding solutions to common challenges.
- Entrepreneurs should be included in dialogues with other stakeholders in society, on a wide range of topics.
- Dialogues between private and public actors need to be enhanced.
- There is a mutual interest in connecting entrepreneurs from the MENA region and Sweden/Europe, including to explore opportunities for collaborations.
- Participants identified a need for more information sharing and exchanges, including on areas such as market and market access in different countries and on business scaling and growth.
- Participants highlighted the value of having access to networks and mentors and they stressed the need for sustaining innovation.

Detailed Report



On May 21st and 22nd, the Dialogue Institute, the Embassy of Sweden in Rabat, and the Swedish Institute (SI) arranged a workshop on entrepreneurship and innovation in Rabat. Participants represented different parts of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the MENA region (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia) and Sweden, including from the MENA diaspora. Some of the participants were alumni from the Swedish Institute’s *‘She Entrepreneurs Leadership Program’*

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The workshop started with welcoming remarks by H.E. Jörgen Karlsson, Ambassador of Sweden in Rabat, who highlighted the importance of entrepreneurship in accelerating the economic growth. The Institute’s Director, Charlotta Sparre, followed and spoke on the Institute’s mission, vision and activities including recent work on entrepreneurship and innovation. From her side, Maria Henoch from the Swedish Institute spoke on the importance of networking and building on existing networks, such as SI’s alumni programs.

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Workshop Sessions and main topics of discussions

Sharing of experiences, knowledge, and best practices among entrepreneurs

The first session was focused on sharing of experiences and best practices on entrepreneurship among the participants. There was a highlight on key points to be taken into consideration for having successful businesses. These include a) learning from both successes and failures, b) establishing and maintaining relevant and strong networks, c) having mentors for guidance, d) working on understanding the customers, and d) the value of co-working spaces and digital meeting points. Furthermore, the importance of creating more inclusive environments for female and young entrepreneurs was highlighted.

Cross-regional cooperation - business between the MENA region and Sweden

In a session on cross-regional cooperation, Business Sweden¹ presented Sweden's business ecosystem and the Swedish experiences in supporting entrepreneurship and innovation. A close cooperation between the public and private sector and academia (Triple Helix) was highlighted as a key strategy to support innovation and staying competitive at national level. Digitalization and affordable access to digital resources was considered an important element in Swedish success, for example in the field of technology.



A discussion followed on the key pillars for building a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem. Participants pointed to the need of a healthy collaboration amongst entrepreneurs and startups, corporations, accelerators. They also highlighted the significance of supportive infrastructure, good educational systems and talent pools, meetup events, coworking spaces and hubs, and funding. The diaspora was recognized as a key resource in helping

to build new ecosystems and being connectors between the regions. With increased digitalization and flexibility, it was also noted that there are good potential opportunities ahead for Swedish and other European companies to recruit internationally, including in the MENA region.

¹ [Market Expansion - Business Sweden \(business-sweden.com\)](https://www.business-sweden.com)

SME scaling – exchange of practical advice and ideas

One of the sessions was devoted to SME scaling. Some key elements identified for SMEs to successfully expand their business were, in addition to financing, having a good market strategy to adapt to customers/local market and to build cross-border networks to find partners, mentors and investors.

Participants identified the strengths of the respective markets in Sweden and the MENA region respectively. While Sweden's identified strengths included innovation/smart design, good infrastructure, transparency, sustainability etc., the MENA region was highlighted as large market, multilingual, young population, emerging tech adoption, and offers logistics, agritech, manufacturing etc. By combining these strengths there could be a considerable potential for scaling. For example, participants suggested creating a digital "talent platform" that could match talent from the MENA region with investors in Sweden or elsewhere and launch a cross-regional acceleration and awareness program for MENA-Nordic countries to facilitate entrepreneurial exchanges through "talent visas".



Study visit at Moroccan organisation StartUp Maroc

The programme included a study visit to StartUp Maroc² to learn from their experiences in supporting entrepreneurs in different parts of Morocco through trainings, acceleration, and mentoring programs.

² Moroccan organization dedicated to fostering entrepreneurship within Morocco

Public-private cooperation to facilitate for entrepreneurship and innovation

A dialogue session on public-private cooperation was organized, with representation from the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), European Investment Bank (EIB) and the Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM).

The speakers noted that regional funds play a significant part in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. It was seen as essential to facilitate access to finance through credit lines, capacity building and by simplifying application procedures. However, in the discussion it was noted that the lack of funds did not necessarily constitute the only obstacle for business in the region but there is also a need for more efficient methods of connecting the right resources with the right entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs as connectors between the MENA region and Europe

During dinner, roundtable conversations were held on how entrepreneurs can contribute to better understanding and enhanced relations between the MENA region and Europe. Participants pointed to the important role of diaspora entrepreneurs in acting as catalysts for economic, cultural, and social exchanges was emphasized, including by transferring knowledge and skills and promoting cultural understanding. They expressed an interest in developing, together with the Dialogue Institute, a more concrete platforms for collaboration between entrepreneurs from the two regions.

Way forward for work on entrepreneurship and innovation

The participants identified the following key points and recommendations for future work:

- **Harness the potential of the private sector and the diaspora as bridgebuilders**

The private sector could be an important actor when it comes to facilitating relations between the MENA region and Sweden/Europe. The diaspora, with its knowledge and relations with both regions, could play a key role.

- **Exchange of information between and within the regions**

The lack of information about the opportunities and conditions in the different markets in the MENA region and in Sweden/Europe, is a factor that considerably hinders trade within and between the regions. Participants underlined the importance of facilitating exchange of information between entrepreneurs and investors, both between and within the regions to create better opportunities for new cooperations.

- **Pop-up events in different countries in the region**

When it comes to the activities of the Dialogue Institute, pop-up events in different countries in the region were recommended. Such events, with the Institute as a platform, could contribute to information and experience exchanges between entrepreneurs. The format in Morocco, with a workshop co-organized with the Swedish embassy and the Swedish Institute (SI) proved a successful model that could be built upon in other countries for future events.

- **Build on existing networks**

Future events organized by the Dialogue Institute should continue to build on existing networks, such as the alumni from the Swedish Institute's Leadership Programs. Ways of further developing this network could be further explored, such as establishing a digital regional forum, as well as using regional network "ambassadors" to share knowledge and market intelligence.

Participants underlined the need for working actively to maintain networks over time with regular connection and activities, including by using a combination of digital and physical formats to facilitate matchmaking and exchange of information. The Swedish embassies in the region should continue to play a role in keeping the connection with the network.

- **Follow-up meetings in connection to other events, or online**

Meetings such as the Tech Arena (Stockholm), RiseUp (Cairo) and Techne Summit (Alexandria) or Slush (Finland) could be used as opportunities to connect entrepreneurs from MENA and Sweden/Europe by organizing meetings back-to-back. Digital follow-up meetings could be also organized focusing on selected niche subjects.

- **Follow-up delegation of entrepreneurs to Sweden**

A collaboration with the MENA embassies in Stockholm could be considered for activities in Sweden, including possibly by bringing a group of entrepreneurs from the region to meet and exchange information with Swedish counterparts.

- **Establishment of a dedicated platform for information and matchmaking**

The establishment of a dedicated platform with information related to investments in the MENA region and Sweden and offering matchmaking would facilitate for investments and new partnerships. Centralization of information in a single database would enhance visibility and accessibility.