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Q1: Respondent details

Name	Mondher Mimouni
Organization	International Trade Centre
Email Address	mimouni@intracen.org
Phone Number	+41 22 730 0111

Q2: Country or Customs territory

- INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Q3: Organization

Public sector

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Q4: Title of case story

EuroMed TIFM: Facilitating trade and investment across the Mediterranean region

Q5: Case story focus

E-commerce development and efforts to bridge the "digital divide".

Q6: Case story abstract

In the Southern Mediterranean region, intra-regional trade is well below potential. One of the biggest constraints is a widespread lack of affordable, high-quality trade information. Finding the data for in-depth market analysis requires major investments of time and financial resources.

In collaboration with 9 partner countries and with financial support from the European Union (EU), the International Trade Centre (ITC) has developed the EuroMed Trade Helpdesk, an online portal that provides crucial trade and market access information and a comprehensive helpdesk service from a network of national technical focal points.

This Trade and Investment Facilitation Mechanism (TIFM) project is setting a decisive foundation for more trade information transparency in the region. Its sustainability will be ensured through systematic data collection and adequate portal ownership by the 9 participating countries.

Q7: Who provided funding?

Bilateral donor

Q8: Project/Programme type

Regional

Q9: Your text case story

The challenge

Access to trade information and market intelligence is crucial for companies and investors to understand potential

business opportunities and to gain competitive advantage in foreign markets.

In the Southern Mediterranean region, intra-regional trade is well below potential. One of the biggest constraints is a widespread lack of affordable, high-quality trade information. Finding the data for in-depth market analysis requires companies to make major investments of time and financial resources. The trade and market information that is available is very limited in terms of data collection, classification and dissemination.

Both governments and the private sector have recognized the region's need for greater transparency about trade information and improved institutional support for cross-border business operations. Trade ministers from nine Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Turkey) have endorsed the need for an online portal of trade-related information through the Union for the Mediterranean partnership (UfM). An analysis of private sector experiences, captured in ITC's recent surveys of non-tariff measures (NTMs) in Egypt, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Tunisia, showed that companies want more transparent and consistent information about doing business in the region, covering areas such as trade procedures, product norms, rules of origin, and border fees.

The solution

In collaboration with nine participating countries and with financial support from the European Union (EU), the International Trade Centre (ITC) has implemented the EuroMed Trade and Investment Facilitation Mechanism (TIFM) to improve economic and regional integration between Mediterranean countries. It provides an online portal of trade information with a helpdesk service covering Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Turkey.

The EuroMed Trade Helpdesk provides free trade information and responds to enquiries submitted to the system. The portal, which operates through a network of trade related institutions in each of the markets, is being trialed in the beneficiary countries and will be officially launched to the public in early 2017.

Modelled on the EU Export Helpdesk, the EuroMed Trade Helpdesk contains information on:

Trade Statistics

- Annual and monthly statistics reported by the 9 TIFM countries at the detailed product level – the national tariff line by bilateral partner country

Customs tariffs and trade regimes

- Import tariffs (MFN or general tariff) from most current year
- Any preferential tariffs granted - for all trading partners (even those outside Euro-Med region)
- Rules of origin for preferential arrangements

Trade Remedies: countervailing & antidumping duties; safeguards

Internal Taxes

- E.g. VAT/sales tax & excise duties

Product specific requirements

- Food safety and animal and plant health regulations
- Compulsory technical regulations (performance, labelling, size/shape, design, function of products)

General compulsory requirements

- Import procedures guide for each beneficiary country

Business Contacts

- Institutions; customs and taxation authorities; chambers of commerce; industry associations; relevant online marketplaces; and event organising bodies

News

- Any announcements, newsletters and events that national focal points may wish to advertise

To ensure that the NTM data is regularly updated, and to help countries comply with their transparency commitments under different bilateral, regional and international agreements, ITC has also developed an online data management tool for countries' use.

In addition, ITC will publish a step by step guide for economic operators to increase transparency about trade-related

procedures for merchandise. Made possible by a contribution from the United States Agency for International Development, the guide will spell out procedural requirements for customs clearance in the region with information on the necessary approval processes, the time and cost of customs clearance, import inspection procedures, import documentation, and other trade control procedures.

The future

The EuroMed Trade Helpdesk and the enquiry management system will be fully operational with regular data updates helping businesses become more competitive in international markets.

While the TIFM project is set to end in mid-2017, the helpdesk service will carry forward; the information will continue to be collected, catalogued and updated in a sustainable manner. ITC will coordinate this in close collaboration with TIFM national technical focal point institutions. To ensure technical sustainability of the portal, the EuroMed Trade Helpdesk will be hosted with ITC's Market Analysis Tools, which are freely accessible public goods also funded by the European Union (EU) and donors to ITC Trust Fund.

By leveraging the existing expertise of ITC in areas of trade intelligence and coordination of data collection, this project can be replicated for other regions to assist other trade facilitation efforts. Moreover, ITC is in discussions with the EU and partners to expand the scope of the project to include components such as an investment and trade obstacles alert system.

Q10: Lessons learnt

The sustainability and continuity of the EuroMed project depend heavily on building genuine trust and productive relationship with member countries. We set out to do so by making transparent communication a priority in every phase of our project. For example, ITC has trained national focal points on the collection and classification of trade data in order to ensure their participation in every step of the project, and then asked them to validate the content of the collected trade data and information before publishing them online. ITC has also presented the portal to national trade support institutions to have their feedback and suggestions as well as to assist in future dissemination. Moreover, in relationship-based societies, cultural sensitivity and awareness is also an invaluable component for any successful project implementation. Having people with a deep understanding of the cultural background of the region is an advantage.