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Embracing Digitalization: the future of start-ups in the South Med region*

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Executive Summary

Digital technology seems to be advancing worldwide more than any other innovation in history, as it has reached more than 50% of the population in developing countries[1]. The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the importance of digitization as a solution to many of the challenges that were faced in almost all sectors and across the globe. The global digital transformation market size has been estimated at USD 589.7 million in 2021 and is projected to grow at a 15.6% per year until 2030. The benefits of digital technologies are vast either on the economies and businesses or on the communities and individuals. However, embracing digitalization requires the availability of the appropriate skills and knowledge and a change in culture.

During the Covid-19 crisis, economies had to find ways to increase the use of technology in order to survive. This ongoing trend can provide great opportunities for the development of new businesses, entrepreneurship and start-ups. However, the technology and software sector in the South Med region is not yet fully developed and many barriers remain that prevent start-ups from being competitive. Some support strategies are being implemented in order to adopt the most appropriate tools to develop the sector and in particular to provide opportunities for the creation of digital start-ups but the road is still long.

The aim of this policy brief is to emphasize on the importance of the technology sector in the South Med region as a new door for start-ups to start their business. After providing an overview of the ICT sector in this region, we will provide some examples of government's initiatives, and highlight the main challenges facing the sector and the impact of COVID-19.

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[1]UN report on the Impact of Digital Technology, 2020, https://www.un.org/en/un75/impact-digital-technologies

We will then focus our analysis on the success stories of three technology start-ups from Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia who benefited from THE NEXT SOCIETY Project. Through a questionnaire, we will highlight that some of the main sector-related obstacles that these start-ups identified are the lack of digital proficiency among users, difficulty to penetrate the digital market, lack of knowledge and skills among the populations and the capacity to grow their projects and internationalize them. These obstacles are in addition to the standard obstacles facing entrepreneurs such as financing, bureaucracy and visibility. The brief then provides conclusion and policy recommendations on how to promote the sector, among which strengthening administrative digitization, improving coordination between the various public authorities, monitor the implementation of innovation and digitization policies and provide a favorable environment for young people to take risks and to encourage digital entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

The benefits of the digital technologies are clear whether it is for economies as a whole, businesses or individuals. They help businesses become more productive. The use of technologies leads to new activities and are important for productive transformation and its resilience in the face of future crises. The last two decades have seen an increase in the use of ICTs by economic agents, transforming the functioning of the economy, social interactions and the performance of businesses. ICTs are used by all economic actors and have a direct impact on the functioning of the economic and social fabric as a whole. The digital revolution is transforming the world, facilitating information flows and the rise of developing countries that can take advantage of these new opportunities2.

More particularly, the software market has been growing exponentially and is expected to reach US$578,018 million in 2021 (in profits). The largest segment of the market is corporate software, with a projected market volume of US$227,671 million in 20213. On the other hand, according to a report by the International Data Corporation (IDC4), global revenue from the artificial intelligence market is expected to grow 15.2% year-over-year in 2021 to reach $341.8 billion. A significant amount that should climb again in 2022 with a growth of 18.8%. The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the importance of digitization as a means of accelerating the productive transformation of the software publishing industry. Currently, software development holds 88% share of the global artificial intelligence market thanks to the shift to distance working and distance learning.

In this regard, promoting Startups represents one of the supporting mechanisms for re-launching a new sustainable economic model based on innovation and new technologies. Businesses should be aware of such a reality and be eager to give to their economic fabric a chance to take full advantage of the fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0).

Accordingly, South Mediterranean countries should equip themselves with governance tools and open up to all national and international support programs. The software market in the region is still yet to be developed. For example, total computer software spending (% of GDP)

[2] *Basu, K. (2016), "Technologies numériques et développement: un potentiel énorme toujours hors de portée pour 4 milliards d'individus privés d'Internet". Dans Rapport Banque Mondiale (2016), Washington*
[3] *"Statista's IT Market Model analysis" [Online]. Available: www.statista.com/outlook/tmo/software/worldwide*
[4] *www.idc.com/tracker/showproductinfo.jsp?containerId=IDC_P37251*

amount for only 0.3% in Tunisia, 0.2% in Egypt and Morocco and almost zero in Algeria and Lebanon5.

The aim of this policy brief is to emphasize on the importance of the technology sector in the South Med region as a new door for start-ups to establish their business. This will be done by highlighting the status of the technology sector in the South med region, while exploring some of the different governments' initiatives to promote this sector. We then highlight the main challenges facing the sector and the possible impact of COVID-19. We will then focus on the success stories of three start-ups from Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia that participated in THE NEXT SOCIETY project (funded by the European Commission). Finally, we will conclude with some policy recommendations to encourage the creation of start-ups in the South-Med region.

2. Status of the ICT sector in the South Med region

There are significant differences between the South Med countries under study when it comes to the adoption and having access to ICT. In the past two decades, it become clear that the region is trying to catch-up with the rest of the world in terms of its digitalization and internet access. This is reflected in the spectacular increase in the number of Internet users between 2000 and 2019 across South Mediterranean countries which reached 1,125% growth. This increase is more significant in Algeria, Libya and Morocco (respectively 41.9%, 37% and 22.46%) and less significant in Egypt and Tunisia (respectively 10.8%; 7.79%) [6].

However, the region is still lagging behind in many aspects of its ICT use. According to the ICT use index[7], the selected South Med Countries are ranked between 95 and 74 worldwide across 131 countries (Table 1) in terms of the ICT use. On this index, Tunisia is the leader in the region (ranked 74 out of 131) followed by Algeria and Morocco (ranked 76 and 81 respectively).

Table1. ICT use index 2019

Country	ICT use index 2019	Rank
Tunisia	53.8	74
Morocco	49.1	81
Lebanon	43.7	94
Egypt	43.1	95
Algeria	53.0	76

Source: Internet Word Stats 20198

Moreover, the environment in which the firms operate, compatibility with existing technologies, the lack of training and expenditure on R&D and lack of specific inputs (such as skilled workers) can play an important role in the process of innovation adoption. This explains the segmented performance of firms in the South Med region in terms of the ICT use.

In 2020, the ratio of skilled workers in South Mediterranean region stood at 67.4% (Figure 1), which is quite low when compared to 88.9% in Malaysia, for example. In Tunisia and Jordan,

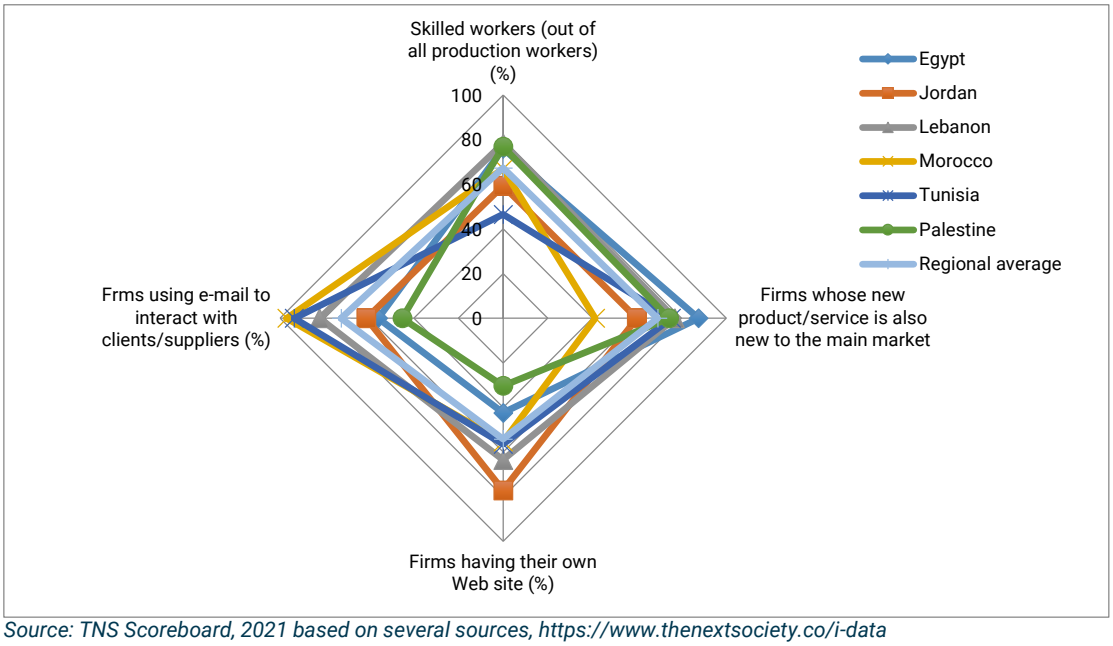
[5] *(Dutta et al. 2020)*
[6] *Internet World Stats. (2019). Retrieved from www.internetworldstats.com.*
[7] *The index is a composite index that weights three ICT indicators (one third each): (1) Percentage of people using the Internet; (2) Fixed (cable) broadband Internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants; (3) Active mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants*
[8] *Internet World Stats. (2019). Retrieved from www.internetworldstats.com.*

respectively, 46.5% and 59.4% of workers only may be classified as skilled. One reason behind these low percentages could be linked to low level of graduates in these sectors and the skills' migration which has been an increasing source of concern in the region.

The skills acquired by the firm and embedded in its human resources are a driver to produce new product/service. However, there are stark regional contrasts: only 69.3% of enterprises in South Mediterranean produce a new product/service which is also new to the main market, compared to 73.9% and 75,2% in India and Malaysia, respectively. Here, Egypt holds the highest percentage in the region with (87.6%) followed by Lebanon (77%). (Figure 1)

In terms of embracing digitalization, more than half (54.2%) of firms of the region have their own website with the highest rate for Jordan (77%). This rate is favorable when compared to other developing countries (e.g. Malaysia and India, respectively, 31.5% and 48.9%).. Having a website is an important channel to promote and market the products to both suppliers and customers. Moreover, 72.6% of the firms in the region use emails to communicate with clients and suppliers, which again ensure efficiency and punctuality. In Morocco and Tunisia almost all companies (respectively, 97% and 93.6%) have access to this facility.

Figure 1. Use of ICT by firms and businesses in South med countries, 2020

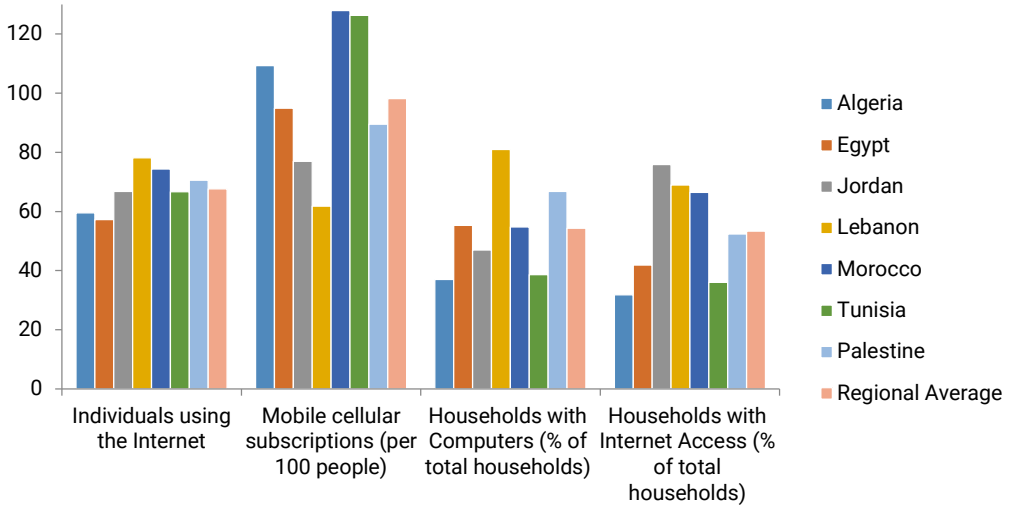


Source: TNS Scoreboard, 2021 based on several sources, https://www.thenextsociety.co/i-data

Despite this, the ICT sector in the region still suffers from many challenges due to the low technology development in most of the countries under study, including technologies developed internally, as well as the availability of and access to these technologies.

Moreover, the general access of the ICT infrastructure in the south Med region is relatively low. Figure 2 shows that only 53.37% of households in this region have access to internet, 54.36% of households have a computer, and 67.64% of individuals use internet.

Figure 2. Access to ICT infrastructure by households and individuals (% of the population), 2019



Source: TNS Scoreboard, 2021 based on several sources, https://www.thenextsociety.co/i-data

Moreover, the region while trying to catch-up with the rest of the world in terms of use of the ICT, it is still not prepared to adopt the technologies of the future, such as the Internet of Things (IoT). According to the Network Readiness Index (NRI[9]), countries of the region are ranking between 84 and 107 (out of 134 countries), which is considered very low. The leader country in the region is Egypt but with a rank of 84th (out of 134 economies), which is quite low. Poor performances are reported in the "future technologies" sub index, whereby Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are classified among the 40 worst performers (see table2).

Table 2. NRI 2020 sub-index[10]

Country	NRI 2020 Rank	Future Technologies[11]	Businesses[12]	Economy[13]
Egypt	84	76	117	89
Lebanon	90	88	42	86
Tunisia	91	100	84	82
Morocco	93	99	91	88
Algeria	107	96	117	89

Source: The NRI report 2020[14]

[9] The NRI, developed by the World Economic Forum, seeks to better understand the impact of ICT on the competitiveness of nations. The NRI is one of the most important indices for measuring the equipment and use of ICT in a country. The NRI is a composite index of three components: the environment for ICT offered by a given country or community, the readiness of the community's key stakeholders (individuals, businesses, and governments) to use ICT, and finally ICT use by these stakeholders.

[10] The NRI is a composite index constructed on several levels.

11Composite index constructed on: Adoption of emerging technologies, Investment in emerging technologies, ICT PCT patent applications, Computer software spending and Robot density.

[12] Composite index constructed on: Firms with website, Ease of doing business, Professionals, Technicians & associate professionals, Business use of digital tools, R&D expenditure by businesses.

[13] Composite index constructed on: Medium- and high-tech industry, High-tech exports, PCT patent applications, Labor productivity per employee and Prevalence of gig economy.

[14] Dutta S. and Lanvin B. (2020) THE NETWORK READINESS INDEX 2020: Accelerating Digital Transformation in a post-COVID Global Economy. Available online : https://networkreadinessindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NRI-2020-V8_28-11-2020.pdf

It will be important for the countries of the Southern Mediterranean region to continue investing in infrastructure and coordination with a view to developing the different networks and connecting them to each other. In order to accelerate the transition to the new economy and improve their performance in ICT to help both business and individuals, most South-Med countries have put in place an ecosystem to encourage the creation and promotion of innovative firms.

3. Digitization and Technology: potentials for start-ups

Digital technology is one of the most important technologies an important source of national economic growth economy. It has also reshaped traditional industries and changed the business environment providing more incentives and opportunities for startups. The development of new technologies has accelerated and promoted the emergence of a significant number of startups operating in the digital field and, on the other hand, to nurture the growth process of youth entrepreneurs. The crisis has provided further new opportunities for startups as they invent solutions to help individuals and public authorities cope with the pandemic and have a real impact. For instance, apart from using digitization for remote medical consultations and distance learning, cloud computing is used to facilitate the 3D printing of essential respiratory equipment that could be used by hospitals, which is one of its kind as a life-saving equipment.

In **Tunisia**, and since the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic, the startup ecosystem has been mobilized to urgently respond to the needs of health authorities and complement the public system. Smart Capital is an example of the operator of the national initiative Startup Tunisia which aims to make Tunisia a Startup Friendly country at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Africa and MENA.

Incubators, accelerators, and angel investors are crucial to the **Egyptian** startup ecosystem, as they are in most other African countries. Flat6labs, created in 2011 by Sawari Ventures, and Falak Startups, which is backed by Egypt's Ministry of International Cooperation and its venture capital arm, Egypt Ventures, are among the most active accelerators. Egypt is among the most attractive countries in Africa and the MENA region for start-ups, not only in terms of the number of deals (amounting for 26% of all MENA deals in 2020) but also in terms of volume amounting to nearly US$194 million in the first half of 2021[15]

To strengthen growth financing for startups and innovative companies, the **Moroccan** government has set up an innovation and start-up financing mechanism called Innov-Invest. In 2019, the fund committed US$24 million and mobilized an additional US$ 43 million locally and internationally, of which US$4 million was allocated to 67 startups as of May 2019. In 2021 Morocco launched Tatwir-Start-up as an End-to-end support for startup projects

Algeria launched in 2020 a new financing mechanism, called "Algerian start-up fund" which is based on investment in capital whose objective is to create pioneering start-ups able to market their products all over the world. Jordan's ecosystem is mostly shaped by young ICT entrepreneurs, with notable accelerators such as Change labs and IBDA3 assisting them.

At the regional level, THE NEXT SOCIETY (TNS) project, funded by the European commission, is contributing to promoting the innovation capacities of seven southern and eastern Mediterranean countries and strengthening their attractiveness. The project offered technical support to more than twenty projects in the field of Software and Technology development in six Mediterranean countries, this includes how to re-think their business strategy and creation,

[15] *Partech, 2020 & MAGNiTT, 2021 and https://financialstories.org/2021/10/04/top-funded-startups-in-egypt-2021/*

networking and marketing strategies like branding visibility. Three success stories start-ups have been selected from Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia from among those that were supported by the TNS (see table 4). These three entrepreneurs, responding to a questionnaire, provided details on their projects, their motivations, the challenges they face, the role of TNS in the success of their entrepreneurial projects and the effect of COVID19 on their activities.

Table 4. List of start-ups that participated in the study

Country	Name	Project Description
Egypt	**DevisionX** https://devisionx.com/	**DevisionX** enables Manufacturing to build their ownAI-Vision Solutions [such as:Quality inspection] Without Coding Without Experience Neededthrough "Tuba" AI-Enabling tool.
Lebanon	**Hihelpme** http://hihelp.me	**Hihelp.me** is an online platform that connects households to home service providers in order to facilitate home repairs, renovations, and maintenances, while ensuring accurate pricing, high quality, and time commitment
Tunisia	**Evey Technologies** http://eveytech.com/	**Evey** develops a Customizable Event Platform that helps Organizers create exciting hybrid and virtual events, Sce. Providers generate new revenues and participants network effectively

The main motivation of these entrepreneurs to create their projects is to solve challenges in their communities and improve everyday life for households and firms. Through their innovations. they have provided solutions to a variety of problems using technologies digitalization and artificial intelligence. For households, Hihelpme connects households to home service providers in order to facilitate home repairs, renovations, and maintenances, while ensuring accurate pricing, high quality, and time commitment. Evey Technologies and DevisionX offer solutions for firms. The first took advantage of COVID19 and proposed an integrated platform as a solution to help event organizers create exciting hybrid and virtual events with live translation and effective networking. It allows businesses to create, publish and promote an event and manage registration, ticketing, multiple parallel visio-conferences with live streaming, virtual booths, online chats, votes and quizzes with a very flexible setting. DevisionX enables Manufacturers/ Businesses to apply AI & Machine vision in solving their daily challenges, such as: Quality Inspection issues. "*As Founders, we have a vision to enable Technology for everyone. "And through our business, we contribute to Digital transformation and Industry4.0 revolution in the Manufacturing sector*", said Samar Hamdy (Co-Founder & CEO).

The three main common challenges faced during the implementation of their projects relate to financial constraints and the difficulty in getting loans and funds for their startups, to reaching new markets to widen their consumers (national and international) and to the ecosystem itself and trust in economic prospects.

The start-ups also identified sector related challenges such as the lack of digital proficiency among users and ICT skills needed to either contribute to develop or use of the digital platform, as described by the Lebanese start-up "*The digital proficiency of technicians was a barrier to implement the project*", as stated by Charles Ayoub (Co-Founder, Hihelpme). Another challenge relates to the difficult to penetrate the digital market and acquiring the confidence of clients (being a national product). The internationalization and growing the project were also other challenges identified by some of the start-ups.

Another challenge cited by the Lebanese respondent relates to the ICT skills needed to either contribute to develop or use of the digital platform. In this line of thought, Charles Ayoub (Co-Founder, Hihelpme startup) mentioned that "*The digital proficiency of technicians was a barrier to implement the project*".

The impact of the pandemic on the startups depended on the nature of their business. While, it was an opportunity for some startups to propose initiatives to support screening efforts, help confined populations, and provide civic education services such as the case of the Tunisian startup EVY, it caused a drawback to others as their business was paused, such the case of the Egyptian startup DevisionX and the Lebanese one Hihelpme.

At the same time, the three start-ups lacked entrepreneurial knowledge and sufficient business and marketing practices. Entrepreneurs often do not know how to seize marketplace opportunities, seek capital and prepare for investment. Therefore, they participated in many training courses at the national, regional and even international levels such as THE NEXT SOCIETY project (funded by the European Commission) which provided them with the needed support through mentoring, boot camps and networking .The key takeaway from these training and mentoring sessions was to re-think the business mindset shift on value proposition design, develop ideas in a constructive and methodological process, self-awareness, and business Intelligence.

The three success stories consider THE NEXT SOCIETY project as an opportunity to open up to the international market and especially to Europe. It helped them to create a brand for their projects to increase visibility, to enlarge their network and to facilitate integration through their large networks especially in Europe, which they are currently targeting. These programs also helped them to prepare their investments, and obtain support through workshops about entrepreneurships such. It also helped them identify and open up to other international markets.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

There is no doubt that while the pandemic had negative effects on economies and individuals, it has shown extraordinary resilience around the world. The shift to digital communication was accelerated for many companies and services, including distance working and videoconferencing in and out of the workplace and access to healthcare, education and essential goods and services.

The South Mediterranean countries are no exception, particularly as the region is endowed with a significant pool of skills especially among the youth with a great appetite for embracing the new waves of technologies and capacities to establish their own businesses. This will provide an important opportunity for these countries to catch-up with the rest of the world in terms of use of technology. This is proven by the potential of the three success stories described. However, a number of challenges still remain, some of which were highlighted by the entrepreneurs that took part in this survey.

The following are some recommendations that could be adopted at the different levels.

At the political level:

- **Improve coordination between the different ministries and public authorities** that **monitor the implementation of innovation and digitization policies** is crucial for the development of an ecosystem in general but also for the technology sector in particular. According to the Global Competitiveness report (2019), this index ranks rather low for most countries in the region, where Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are clearly underperforming in this regard (ranked 91, 109, 115, respectively), while Egypt (ranked 77) and Lebanon (ranked 78) have made some progress [16].
- **Sustain the role played by research institutions and industry partnerships** and devote more funding for research and encourage institutions to adopt IT strategies. More funds must be invested to: develop and modernize information and communication systems within and between ministries and universities on the one hand, and public and private institutions affiliated to it on the other hand, promote electronic communications (portal, intranet...), develop and modernize electronic document management, strengthen IT security, deploy pilot projects for the development of higher education electronic management strategies, and develop integrated online services.
- **Encourage the use of digital strategies in scientific research** to deal with problems involving massive data processing. The transformation of research practice by this method implies in particular a growing intersection of research fields to accelerate discovery of new connections. On the other hand, making free access to relevant scientific data and results goes a long way to improving the impact, transparency and reproducibility of scientific research.
- **Update education and training programs with a focus on digital and science**, technology and engineering programs and encourage digital entrepreneurship. For example, entrepreneurial education at school level[17] was ranked low in Egypt and Morocco (ranked 36thand 32nd, respectively (out of 45 economies) in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.[18]).
- **Building entrepreneurial culture and reduce the digital divide between rural and urban areas** through the development of ICT equipment. The expansion of digital technology to remote areas can provide a good cost-benefit ratio. Governments can adopt policies that provide equipment with affordable prices to create new public-private alliances to promote connectivity of poor urban and rural areas, improve the use of Access Funds and universal service and ensure fair competition between telecommunications operators. Thus, a partnership agreement with mobile telecommunications companies and with telecommunications equipment suppliers will be a good solution to offer cost-effective high-speed mobile services to this type of population.
- More Specifically**, governments need to strengthen rural broadband networks** by reallocating vacant frequency bands previously used by broadcasters to long-distance internet transmission. They must also identify and support the most promising digital innovations for rural development. Agritech startups and those with data-related activities are booming in the region, and governments can collaborate with technology companies to disseminate agricultural best practices.

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[16]*The Global Competitiveness Report 2019. Available online on: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf]*

[17] *Schools are introducing ideas of entrepreneurship and instilling students with entrepreneurial values such as enquiry, opportunity recognition and creativity. The degree to which training for the creation or management of small and medium-sized enterprises is incorporated into the education and training system.*

[18]*Bosma N., Hill S., Lonescu-Somers A., Kelley D., Guerrero M., Schott T. (2021), "Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2020/2021". https://www.gemconsortium.org/file/open?fileId=50691*

- **Encourage investment in ICT from both public and private sectors**. In order to increase the benefits of digitalization, digital innovation should be extended beyond large cities to help informal workers increase productivity and give enterprises the ability to compete in the digital age. Invest in submarine cable networks and land cable landing stations to connect most businesses to the Internet and increase connection speeds. Build a new high-speed optical fiber infrastructure, and access general broadband at an affordable price and good quality to encourage enterprises to move toward digitalization and adopt Industry 4.0. Complementary solutions to expand and improve transmission networks, such as Internet Exchange Points (IXP), data servers, and satellite transmission systems.

At technology and software sector level

- **Creation of cooperation networks** linking companies from various Mediterranean countries, with the aim in particular of exchanging information on products, new applications, marketing techniques and trade relations.
- **Pay attention to the vital role of training in the field of entrepreneurship at universities** as well as in post-school education, putting in place incubators and accelerators. This training helps to reduce aversion of entrepreneurial risk. This is confirmed by the interest given the respondents of this study to the TNS support program. In this regard, in addition to mitigating ecosystem constraints, we recommend governments build co-creation programs that introduce firms with challenges to startups to solve their problems. Moreover, building a community for Next Society alumni and participants to exchange experiences can be envisioned. This will allow startups to work for international markets from their region, which suffers from human capital flight and where new start-ups often intend to move abroad.
- Facilitation of **market access** for start-ups by the removal of protectionist policies and given the high risk of failure associated with creating a highly innovative business, **simplifying the procedures required** to create and set-up a business is needed.
- **Upgrade the innovation financing system** in the Southern Mediterranean which lacks dynamic structures as entrepreneurs are not always aware of the different support programs in place. In this regard, it is essential to revise **the investment strategy in the ICT sector, the national innovation syste**m in each of these countries by working on a new regulatory framework, and reconsidering the actions to be carried out with start-ups, clusters and technology transfer centers using an à la carte service offer. This requires governments to boost talent, foster regional and international integration, and create a fund for innovation.

Entrepreneurs who participated in this study

Charles Ayoub – Hihelp.me, Lebanon

Charles Ayoub is an entrepreneur and consultant holding a Bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering, a Master of Research in Renewable Energy and currently an MBA candidate in Sustainable Development at Rotterdam School of Management. Through his professional experience across different sectors and his entrepreneurial journey founding hihelp.me, a digital platform advancing facility maintenance services and Group Talks Jal el Dib, a socio-economic debate platform raising civic awareness; Charles dedicates himself to help in the change needed to transition into a more sustainable and inclusive world.

Samar Hamdy – DevisionX, Egypt

Engineer & Entrepreneur has 8+ years of experience in Marketing & Business Development for Tech & B2B Businesses using her engineering background and business/marketing experience. She is Leading Marketing & Business Development Activities in devisionX, building networks that support Company road-map. Samar has a contribution in pivoting the DevisionX business model from Customized model to "TUBA" Tool. Samar got her BSc of Electronics Engineering in 2012, a Diploma in Marketing from RITI in 2015 and MicroMaster program of Managing Technology & Innovation in RWTH Aachen University in 2021"

Noômen Lahimer – Evey Technologies, Tunisia

Noômen Lahimer is an Economist particularly passionate about entrepreneurship: in learning, teaching and doing**.** Holding a PhD in Economics and Founder of Evey Technologies, a Startup for Event Management, He believes in the power of passion, design thinking & rapid action in change making! Our vision is to help event organizers create exciting and engaging events for their communities, anywhere, anytime.

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