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## **IMPORTANCE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INNOVATIVE ECOSYSTEM WITHIN UNIVERSITIES**

The development of an innovative ecosystem within universities has become a central pillar of our institutional strategy, enabling universities to extend their influence beyond traditional teaching and research missions. In this context, our university offers a compelling example through its deliberate and sustained collaborations with non-academic partners. Working closely with private-sector companies, public institutions, NGOs, and start-ups has created a powerful synergy that strengthens both knowledge creation and real-world problem-solving. These partnerships generate multiple benefits: they enhance the relevance of academic research, accelerate the adoption of new technologies, and foster a culture of entrepreneurship among students and faculty. From an impact evaluation perspective, collaboration with the non-academic world provides measurable added value, such as increased research productivity, higher employability outcomes for graduates, and improved societal and economic contributions at the regional level. Furthermore, these partnerships allow the university to co-design solutions with stakeholders, ensuring that innovations address actual needs and are implemented effectively. By integrating rigorous impact assessment into these initiatives, the university can demonstrate the tangible benefits of its collaborations, justify strategic investments, and continuously refine its innovation strategy. Ultimately, these interactions position the university as a catalyst for sustainable development and a trusted partner in shaping the future of its community.

### **Case of case study research: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Tunisia**

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Despite substantial progress in dismantling gender barriers, gender disparities still persist in the entrepreneurial landscape. This inequality is notably prominent in regions like the Middle East and North Africa, where

female entrepreneurship rates remain disproportionately low. The establishment of export consortia can help bridge this gap by facilitating networking, knowledge sharing, and collaboration among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) led by women. They can help expand business networks, increase entrepreneurial empowerment, enable knowledge transfer, and improve overall business performance among participating firms.

Worldwide, few women decide to engage in entrepreneurship and even fewer in export. The Middle East and North Africa have the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship worldwide (World Bank, 2019). Only 19% of formal businesses in Tunisia are headed by women. While governments across the globe operate programs to improve firms' capabilities, evaluations suggest many have modest impact and little evidence exists regarding effective measures to promote female entrepreneurship and export.

In a research study performed by Florian Munch Fabian Sheifele and Amira Bouziri, we examine whether helping small women-led firms connect and establish a joint legal entity, an export consortium, eases the main barriers to their (export) activity. Based on a focus group and previous literature the main barriers are:

1. **Pooling resources** - Women-owned firms tend to be small-scale and less productive therefore the collective action of the consortia could help overcome these shortcomings. By pooling resources, the consortia could reduce the fixed costs associated with exporting. Consortia members could also learn management skills from each other and from consultants during the creation and establishment process, thereby improving firm productivity.

2. **Expanding networks** - Female entrepreneurs typically have smaller networks which are essential for entering new markets and establishing relational contracts in international trade. Furthermore, women are concerned about unfamiliar (legal) business environments, and have limited trust in predominantly male trading partners. Export consortia can offer female entrepreneurs a new network of like-minded peers, distinct from their family and friends. Regular interactions with peers may boost (business-related) self-confidence as the consortia may also serve as a formal platform for female entrepreneurs to conduct international business in a safe environment.

### **The role of export consortia creation**

We partnered with the international German cooperation, GIZ and the Tunisian export promotion agency under the umbrella of the ministry of commerce to study the effect of export consortia on female entrepreneurs in Tunisia through a randomized controlled trial. In a nationwide communication campaign, we recruited 176 eligible and interested female-led SMEs. Out of the 176 female-led SMEs, 87 were randomly invited to become a member of one of four consortia (Agri-food, Handicraft, Services, Information Technology and Communication), with the remaining firms serving as a pure control group for comparison.

The first period of the intervention - Consortia Creation - focused on creating the consortia and strengthening entrepreneurial self-confidence, business and exporting skills, and networks of female entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurs received a bundle of workshops, personal coaching, and took part in a series of networking events. At the end of this period, firms had to decide if and in what format they would like to continue cooperating and sign a cooperation agreement.

The second period – Consortia export promotion – focuses on making the consortia operational and promoting their exports and is currently ongoing. In the following, we present results that were collected in a midline survey after Phase 1 - Consortia Creation.

### **Main outcomes**

#### **Business networks and the power of collective networking**

At the program's midline, female entrepreneurs gather regularly in groups of two (Figure 1), and those who opt to participate in the consortium, gather with up to three additional female entrepreneurs to discuss business. All female entrepreneurs randomly assigned to the treatment group receive an invitation to participate in the activities of the first treatment period, Consortia Creation. However, only around two thirds of them regularly attend the sessions, and participation in the sessions is strongly correlated with the decision to join the consortium. As a result of participating in the consortium, the number of female CEOs that treated firms regularly meet has doubled from three to six. Consequently, female entrepreneurs have now more female CEOs than male CEOs in their networks.

## **Entrepreneurial empowerment through building confidence and breaking barriers**

Female entrepreneurs in the treatment group exhibit a 5% increase in perceived empowerment compared to their counterparts in the control group. This effect appears to be particularly pronounced among women who initially reported lower levels of entrepreneurial confidence, as they demonstrated higher confidence levels following participation in the consortia creation workshops. Entrepreneurial confidence and empowerment are measured as a series of six self-affirmations about one's capacity to manage business and master administrative and logistic processes for export on a 5-point Likert scale. In addition, a list experiment designed to reveal sensitive information suggests that none of the female entrepreneurs in the treatment group felt compelled to seek advice from a male authority figure (such as husband, father) prior to making a strategic business decision, while 13% of female entrepreneurs in the control group reported feeling such an obligation.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the association between universities and non-academic partners is essential for driving innovation and strengthening the overall ecosystem. By combining academic expertise with the practical insights, resources, and agility of external stakeholders, universities can accelerate the development of impactful solutions and ensure that research responds to real societal needs. These collaborations enhance technology transfer, stimulate entrepreneurship, and support economic and social development at both local and global levels. Ultimately, such partnerships create a more dynamic, inclusive, and responsive innovation ecosystem one that benefits students, researchers, industry, and the wider community alike.