

An Analysis of the Innovative Capacity of Tunisian Firms: A patent Approach

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The aim of this study is to examine the ability of the Tunisian firms to invent and innovate in comparison to their competitors. This will somehow amount to an evaluation of the impact of the patent laws being in force in Tunisia since 1888, and thus, determine whether the legal environment should be accompanied by more efficient incentives likely to render the Tunisian firms more innovative.

Considering patents as a stock of knowledge at the disposal of the economy, we move on to elaborate a breakdown by sector and product, different from the WIPO one, of patents deposited in Tunisia until 1994. Thus we set up for the first time in Tunisia a matrix describing the sectors source of innovation. Thirdly, we exploit the findings obtained taking advantage of one of the functions of the patent, namely as an indicator of inventive and innovative activity in order to analyze the situation prevailing in this field within the Tunisian economy and at the same time examine the profile of the depositors as well as of the "quality" of the patents.

This study yields some quite interesting findings, the most important of which is the fact that the majority of the patents are deposited by foreigners. These patents are concentrated in some sectors and some products. Furthermore, there is some kind of concordance between the share of patents originating from some countries and the share that these countries hold in trade flows towards Tunisia. As to the analysis of the patents deposited by Tunisian nationals, it reveals that they are in line with the international trends as far as their sectoral concentration is concerned. But the analysis of the depositors' profile shows an important problem consisting in the fact that most of these patents are deposited by individuals. This situation echoes the structural problems which the Tunisian firms go through, and highlights the problem of their ability to cope with foreign competition within the framework of GATT agreements and the Free Trade Zone with the EU. This is all the more so that expenditures on R&D account only for 0.29% of GDP (1993) of which barely 6.8% are made by the firms.