

## The Role of Business Intelligence in the Internationalization of Moroccan Companies in Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Abstract.** Moroccan firms are increasingly showing interest in African markets. However, they face numerous challenges in accessing these markets. This article aims to underscore the critical role of business intelligence in the internationalization process of Moroccan companies in sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, it examines the characteristics of business intelligence implementation in the region and proposes a series of measures to support companies in successfully executing their strategies in sub-Saharan African markets. Business intelligence is presented as a strategic lever capable of driving the international development of Moroccan companies in the region.

**Keywords:** *Internationalization; Business intelligence; Influence; Market monitoring; sub-Saharan Africa; Morocco.*

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### 1. Introduction

Thanks to globalization, the ability of companies to expand their activities beyond national borders has become essential to facing competition and seizing opportunities. Indeed, business internationalization is a powerful and complex contemporary phenomenon that affects not only companies but also states, communities, and societies.

Globalization includes economic integration and increased interdependence between countries. Consequently, globalization offers international opportunities and possibilities for enhancing profits, production, trade, and services for many companies.

Internationalization is seen as a process through which companies expand internationally, manage their activities abroad, develop relationships and networks that extend beyond borders, and adopt specific modes of entry adapted to different contexts. It is considered one of the most important pillars of development for companies.

According to Krikštulytė and Korsakienė (2016), internationalization is “involvement in the processes of international trade, development and continuous growth of companies, as well as various relationships between different institutions and industries on a regional and global level.” In this context, internationalization enables companies to review their strategies, update their practices, and develop their competencies.

To this end, this article seeks to address the contribution of business intelligence to the internationalization of Moroccan companies in Sub-Saharan Africa.

We draw on the work and discussions from a “Strategic Intelligence Days” conference cycle focusing on the contribution of business intelligence to the strategies of Moroccan companies in Africa, which we initiated in 2018. This cycle included the participation of around 100 experts representing intelligence firms and intelligence units of Moroccan companies operating in Sub-Saharan Africa. The fruitful exchanges with participants helped contextualize our research by integrating relevant insights from various professional backgrounds. The feedback shared during these sessions has deepened our understanding of the current internationalization

dynamics of Moroccan companies in Africa. These exchanges also played a crucial role in validating and refining our hypotheses, reinforcing the rigor of our empirical approach. This research article aims to highlight the role of information management in the internationalization process and the contribution of business intelligence to internationalization. It also seeks to provide material for a broader reflection.

## **2. The internationalization of Moroccan companies in sub-Saharan Africa**

In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has become a popular destination for Moroccan companies seeking to internationalize their activities. This trend has been particularly pronounced following the success of several major business groups in the internationalization process. Simultaneously, a series of measures has been adopted to support this dynamic, including more flexible investment regulations. Additionally, the conclusion of various international agreements aimed at promoting and protecting investments, along with the signing of over 500 cooperation agreements in various fields with sub-Saharan African countries since 2001, has created an environment conducive to the expansion of Moroccan companies in the region.

This enthusiasm has been further bolstered by the creation of a 200-million-dirham fund to strengthen the presence of Moroccan private operators in the African market. The combination of factors, including the past successes of well-known companies, favorable regulatory adjustments, and international cooperation initiatives, has established sub-Saharan Africa as a strategic destination for the commercial expansion of Moroccan businesses.

The African continent represents immense potential in terms of supply and demand and is abundant in natural resources, minerals, and energy. Projections for Africa's population growth indicate that it is set to quadruple in just 90 years, further enhancing its economic significance on a global scale. According to projections published by UNICEF in 2017, Africa's population is growing even faster than previously predicted. These factors are contributing positively to the emergence of a large African market that continues to attract numerous investors.

This dynamic has resulted in a significant increase in the volume of Moroccan investments in Africa in recent years (Dafir, 2021). Moroccan direct investment, spread across 30 African countries and valued at a cumulative US\$4 billion, accounts for 60% of Morocco's outward foreign direct investment.

Morocco's strategic dynamic in Africa lies at the intersection of offensive strategies by emerging countries and the persistence of traditional partnerships. As an African nation, Morocco aims to establish itself as a leading strategic partner. This strategy, articulated within a global vision, has markedly improved Morocco's brand image and visibility on the continent. Furthermore, the Kingdom positions itself as a strategic ally committed to fostering South-South cooperation. It is also emerging as a significant player in tripartite cooperation, emphasizing its role in sharing experiences and developing synergies. Morocco has thus become a key actor, ambitious in its desire to share its multi-sector expertise for the benefit of African countries and their human development.

Some Southern economies have developed technological capabilities and specific advantages, allowing them to invest initially in neighboring countries or regions with similar levels of development, following the staged approach of the investment development path.

The internationalization of Moroccan companies in Africa demands in-depth research and the collection of strategic information to minimize risks, adapt to local realities, and capitalize on market opportunities. Morocco's strategic vision in Africa underscores its ambitions to act as a prominent partner while contributing to sustainable development and fostering stronger ties across the continent.

### 3. Information needs

Over and above the limited availability of official statistics on African markets, which are rarely complete and irregularly updated (Gweth, 2022), mastering the process of gathering, analyzing, and protecting information is one of the most promising ways to facilitate the internationalization of companies on the continent. Before embarking on an internationalization operation, a company must first identify the information it needs and address several key questions, such as selecting the target country or countries, determining the modalities of internationalization, implementing international marketing techniques, and seeking both local and foreign partners (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2015).

When examining the challenges of internationalization, several authors highlight that a lack of knowledge remains a pervasive issue (Krikštulytė and Korsakienė, 2016). Business intelligence, among other objectives, aims to identify and articulate information needs, as well as to collect, transform, assimilate, and act on information for strategic purposes (Sybord, 2015).

Mastering information needs is key to the success of a company's internationalization process. Indeed, internationalization is fundamentally a decision driven by information requirements. In this regard, the international development of any company underscores the importance of gathering, analyzing, and utilizing strategic information to remain competitive (Tchouassi, 2017).

According to Alaoui and Ouachi (2021), the internationalization process is influenced by the interaction between learning about international business operations and engaging with foreign markets. Furthermore, information requirements are intrinsically tied to the nature of the market and the availability of relevant data. These requirements grow in complexity alongside the challenges of international engagement, compounded by the opacity of certain target markets due to information deficits.

One of the most critical decisions in internationalization is whether to expand beyond national borders and, if so, how to plan and execute international operations. During this process, the application of business intelligence depends heavily on the selection of information and its transformation into actionable knowledge for decision-making.

The Uppsala model emphasizes market knowledge as a fundamental component of the internationalization process, serving as a key driver for gradual and successful entry into foreign markets. The choice of target countries, cooperation models, and partners is not straightforward and depends on various endogenous and exogenous factors (Toulová *et al.*, 2015). Entrepreneurs must weigh multiple criteria and data in making these decisions. Studying each location choice is essential to optimizing the global value chain and international decomposition of production processes.

Acquiring sufficient information on the attractiveness of foreign markets, potential international opportunities, and foreign operations is critical to the success of international activities and contributes to improved internationalization outcomes. Moreover, obstacles to internationalization stemming from a lack of information can be mitigated through local government export promotion programs.

Companies operating internationally face numerous challenges and risks, including unfair competition, protectionism, partner insolvency, non-compliance with commitments, regulatory disparities between countries, exchange rate volatility, and political instability (Toulová *et al.*, 2015). They are also vulnerable to informational threats such as disinformation, data theft, or hacking by competitors. For example, Morocco's trade with many African countries is hindered by a lack of information, despite the existence of numerous agreements (Alaoui and Ouachi, 2021). Officials often lack knowledge of the preferential trade frameworks with African partner

countries, underscoring the need for sustained communication efforts and greater involvement of the business community in preparing and negotiating agreements to ensure they reflect real needs.

From this perspective, information management emerges as an indispensable tool for companies operating in international markets. It represents a practice of proven utility for managers seeking to navigate the complexities of global business environments.

In Morocco, various confederations and associations, such as the Agence Marocaine de Développement des Investissements et des Exportations and Maroc PME, have been established to support SMEs in their internationalization efforts. These organizations play a significant role, particularly in specific regions, by coordinating and participating in exhibitions and trade fairs, thereby facilitating the acquisition of initial knowledge by local companies.

#### **4. Business intelligence contribution to internationalization**

Integrating business intelligence into companies' internationalization strategies enhances their ability to generate relevant knowledge tailored to the demands of international competition in the region. It also promotes the implementation of influence and promotional actions aimed at strengthening the brand image of these companies.

Business intelligence, defined as “the coordinated search, processing, and distribution of information useful to economic players for exploitation” (Bulinge and Moinet, 2013), stands out for its ability to mobilize knowledge and skills as sources of economic advantage.

In the context of internationalization, companies embarking on this process require a thorough understanding of the characteristics of target markets, local competitive conditions, the technical and commercial feasibility of their offerings abroad, and the overall global context. Accessibility to accurate market information plays a pivotal role in facilitating internationalization and assessing the attractiveness of foreign markets. Conversely, internationalization managers frequently encounter obstacles due to a lack of relevant information on international markets, which hinders the initiation or further development of overseas activities.

A study on the successful internationalization of Malaysian SMEs highlighted the critical impact of market intelligence as a competitive advantage in exports (Falahat *et al.*, 2020). A company's ability to implement a business intelligence approach enables the development of an internationalization diagnosis. This process helps identify risks, resource needs, and the mobilization of assets while designing an international strategy. The goal is to make informed decisions that minimize risks and reduce uncertainties (Colovic, 2013). In this sense, business intelligence focuses on decision-making, minimizing risks in an environment that the company does not fully control (Larivet *et al.*, 2016).

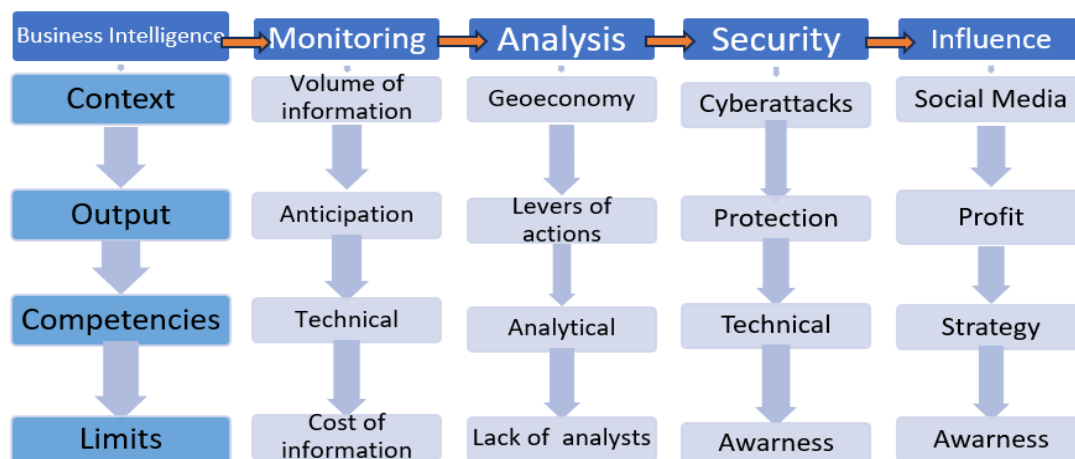
The implementation of business intelligence relies on a proactive approach to information management. This involves activities such as active research, analysis, influence, and securing information (Harbulot, 2014). The strategic objective is to optimize the collection and use of relevant data, equipping economic actors with the tools needed to make informed decisions. By incorporating processes of in-depth research, critical evaluation, strategic influence, and information security, business intelligence bolsters the competitiveness of organizations in a constantly evolving economic environment.

In Morocco, companies are increasingly seeking external expertise or establishing internal monitoring and economic intelligence units.

In this context, we propose four levels of economic intelligence practices in Africa: monitoring, analysis, security, and influence. A comparison of data collected from monitoring specialists has made it possible to define each level of economic intelligence based on its context, outputs,

required skills, and observed limitations within African countries. This information can be represented schematically as shown in the figure below.

*Figure 1: 4\*4 matrix of internationalization of levels of economic intelligence practice in Africa*



Source: The authors

Indeed, the 4x4 internationalization matrix integrates four levels of internationalization practice, each defined by four common criteria: context, output, competencies, and limitations.

#### a. Strategic Monitoring and Collection Activities

Strategic monitoring involves the systematic collection and analysis of information from the business environment. It is a core component of economic intelligence, designed to answer a critical question frequently encountered by companies: *What decision should be made?*

The type of monitoring varies depending on the specific business environment to which it is applied. Common forms of monitoring include:

- **Informational Monitoring:** Focused on identifying opportunities or exploring new markets.
- **Competitive Monitoring:** Concentrated on competitors, their strategies, and actions.
- **Marketing Monitoring:** Centered on analyzing success stories and best practices.
- **Field Information Monitoring:** Linked to understanding the physical and operational environment.
- **Regulatory and Legal Monitoring:** Related to tracking laws and regulations.

Monitoring plays a pivotal role in the success of international companies by enabling access to critical insights about country markets, local competitive conditions, and the broader global context of internationalization.

In the context of Moroccan companies' internationalization efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa, the process typically begins with collecting information relevant to new markets. The type of monitoring employed depends on the specific needs of the company. The following table summarizes tools developed by companies to align monitoring efforts with their objectives in the targeted markets.

**Table 1: Needs matrix and types of monitoring**

Needs	Tools
Opportunities / Markets	Information monitoring
Competition	Competitive monitoring
Success stories	Marketing monitoring
Risks	Field monitoring
Regulatory	Regulatory monitoring
Agreement	Legal monitoring

*Source: The authors*

Several companies utilize business intelligence tools to monitor political and economic changes in target countries in real time, enabling comprehensive and up-to-date analysis.

In practice, many monitoring managers emphasize field monitoring as the most commonly used method for gathering information in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to regional experts, this approach is often considered the most effective and relevant. Information collected directly by professionals on-site plays a pivotal role in identifying opportunities and threats on an international scale. These field-derived insights form a crucial preliminary step in developing an internationalization strategy.

The significance of field monitoring was highlighted during the “Strategic Intelligence Days,” where meetings were held with approximately ten intelligence professionals specializing in Sub-Saharan Africa. Participants stressed the importance of conducting field monitoring missions to validate collected information<sup>1</sup>, especially since many documents are outdated and figures unverified<sup>2</sup>. At this level, several Moroccan firms offer field missions to gather critical data on risks and opportunities.

Direct on-site interactions also provide an effective means of understanding target markets. They allow companies to better identify customer needs and the unique characteristics of international markets. To overcome cultural and psychological barriers and access essential information for international development, companies are encouraged to collaborate with local partners.

Another valuable channel for collecting strategic information is Moroccan embassies in the region (Dafir and Salam, 2016). These embassies provide up-to-date and otherwise inaccessible data to Moroccan companies. However, establishing contact with economic advisors at embassies can sometimes prove challenging<sup>3</sup> (Dafir, 2014).

### **b. Analysis of Information**

The analysis of information is a critical step in the business intelligence process. It is often considered the most challenging phase, as it requires a deep understanding of geostrategic issues and extensive experience. The objective is to derive relevant strategic recommendations

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<sup>1</sup> See : <https://ar.yabiladi.com/articles/details/71124/rabat-l-internationalisation-entreprises-marocaines-afrique.html> consulted on 22/10/2024.

<sup>2</sup> According to monitoring officials, the field makes it possible to confirm or deny the information collected.

<sup>3</sup> Many reasons are put forward, including the absence of direct contact, non-response to requests, etc.

by analyzing key market indicators such as economic growth in target countries, local market sizes, and sector-specific trends.

Analyzing diverse data categories—such as financial performance, investments, and partnerships of competing companies operating in the region—further enhances the quality of insights.

In terms of methodology, many experts who participated in the “Strategic Intelligence Days” highlighted their use of a mixed approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. Advanced statistical techniques, such as time series analysis, are commonly used to evaluate trends and make projections. Concurrently, qualitative data from interviews and documentary analyses are subjected to thematic analysis to identify strategic perspectives.

This combined methodological approach facilitates a comprehensive assessment of the opportunities and risks associated with the internationalization of Moroccan companies in Africa, thereby improving the quality of strategic recommendations.

In practice, this process involves transforming raw information into actionable insights for companies operating in the field. The analysis is carried out using a technical methodology that demands advanced skills and a forward-looking approach.

However, many companies aiming to internationalize struggle with a shortage of business intelligence experts. As a result, they often rely on consulting firms and independent experts to manage this crucial step. For many companies, especially SMEs, the high cost of these services is prohibitive. Consequently, they delegate this task to internal employees who may lack the necessary expertise, which can negatively impact the quality of the analysis.

This disparity highlights a distinction between large companies, which often have dedicated competitive intelligence units, and SMEs, many of which are unaware of the importance of engaging competitive intelligence professionals. These professionals are not only scarce but also costly, making them less accessible to smaller firms.

Another important aspect is the role of think tanks in providing reports and studies to benefit Moroccan companies. The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS), formerly known as the OCP Policy Center, is a Moroccan think tank associated with the OCP Group. Its mission includes improving international public policies related to Africa. The center produces studies and analyses on African geopolitics and economics, among other topics.

Similarly, the Royal Institute of Strategic Studies (IRES) is a key player in analyzing information through its monitoring unit. IRES publishes an annual digital report, the "Annual Survey Paper", which aims to raise awareness among public and private stakeholders as well as decision-makers about emerging trends critical for short- and medium-term strategies and action plans.

### **c. Security and Protection of Information**

Security, as a key component of the business intelligence process, encompasses all measures used to safeguard sensitive information from malicious activities and hacking. Within a defensive framework, the protection of intangible and informational assets aims to secure all non-physical resources that provide the organization with a competitive advantage.

The protection of information assets requires the active involvement of all components of the company, the use of robust technological tools, and the awareness and training of staff to successfully implement an effective confidentiality policy. According to a survey conducted by Tarek *et al.* (2017), there is a positive correlation between the security of information assets and the competitiveness of companies in foreign markets.

Companies seeking internationalization face various risks that could jeopardize their strategies. According to the managers interviewed, the protection of information within Moroccan

companies remains insufficient, and many organizations are poorly equipped to counter informational threats. This observation is echoed by several researchers, particularly regarding Moroccan exporting SMEs (Sqalli, 2020).

One of the prevalent threats faced by companies is phishing — a fraudulent technique designed to trick individuals into divulging personal or financial information (such as account credentials or passwords) by impersonating a trusted entity. Phishing scams are widespread in the region<sup>4</sup> and pose a significant risk to businesses.

A critical issue is raising awareness among directors and managers about the need to implement tools and measures to protect against informational threats and espionage, which are becoming increasingly frequent and sophisticated. During the “Strategic Intelligence Days,” several Moroccan experts stressed the importance of organizing specialized training for managers of Moroccan companies operating in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, given the complexity and recurrence of the risks they face.

#### **d. Influence**

Influence constitutes the fourth pillar of economic intelligence, serving as an invisible tool of persuasion and strategic pressure. It is employed to exert direct or indirect influence on a company’s environment, aiming to shape the decisions of stakeholders (Juillet and Racouchot, 2012). For a company seeking internationalization, the objective of an influence strategy is to increase market share in a target country by leveraging various persuasive approaches.

Developing an influence strategy in a specific country requires going beyond traditional technical communication methods and employing a range of levers. Two primary influence strategies are commonly identified: lobbying and managing competitive signals.

1. Lobbying is used to influence external stakeholders, such as public authorities, to promote a company’s interests. This strategy involves guiding the development, implementation, or interpretation of legislative measures, standards, and regulations, as well as influencing decisions by public authorities (Larivet *et al.*, 2016). Morocco’s economic diplomacy in sub-Saharan Africa exemplifies the effective use of lobbying to defend the interests of Moroccan companies in the region. Key elements of this strategy include royal visits, membership in various African cooperation initiatives, the expansion of Moroccan embassies in sub-Saharan Africa, and the deployment of soft power strategies. Companies also play a central role in this influence strategy by actively engaging in the internationalization of their activities. This approach strengthens national competitiveness by providing access to strategic assets, technologies, skills, natural resources, and markets, while simultaneously improving operational efficiency.
2. Managing Competitive Signals involves sending specific signals to competitors to influence their market positions or strategies. Although highly effective, this approach is complex and requires careful execution. Moroccan companies looking to expand into African markets often utilize social networks as an influential tool. According to several business intelligence managers who participated in the "Strategic Intelligence Days" conference cycle<sup>5</sup>, social media enables companies to target consumers directly without relying on on-site communication agencies.

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, the General Directorate for Competition, Consumer Affairs and Fraud Control of the Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Recovery publishes notes to raise awareness of these practices which are becoming more and more recurrent.

<sup>5</sup> Check : <https://portail-je.fr/short/1994/cr-intelligence-economique-et-internationalisation-rabat-accueil-les-sid>. Consulted on 22/10/2024.



However, raising awareness among stakeholders about the importance of social networks in influence strategies is crucial. Involving various collaborators in the success of the internationalization strategy can help companies address the intense competition they face in these markets.

### 3. Conclusion

Moroccan companies are increasingly recognizing the importance of economic intelligence as a vital tool in their internationalization strategies.

Several large Moroccan groups with significant influence in Africa have adopted proactive approaches to business intelligence by establishing dedicated departments. Major players such as the Bank of Africa, Maroc Telecom, MASEN (Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy), and the OCP (Office Chérifien des Phosphates) have acknowledged the strategic importance of economic intelligence in their continental expansion.

The creation of dedicated business intelligence departments within these companies underscores their commitment to collecting, analyzing, and effectively utilizing information to inform their decision-making processes. These departments are tasked with monitoring economic, political, and competitive trends in African markets, enabling them to anticipate opportunities and risks while enhancing their competitive positioning on the continent.

The establishment of these economic intelligence structures reflects a strategic approach aimed at deepening the understanding of the specific business environments in each African country, thereby strengthening Moroccan companies' positions on the international stage. These initiatives illustrate the growing recognition of economic intelligence as a critical factor in the success of internationalization strategies for large Moroccan firms operating in Africa.

However, these companies face challenges in adapting their strategies to the unique characteristics of African markets. While field monitoring remains an invaluable method for gathering market information, other types of monitoring provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer needs and allow companies to anticipate market challenges, particularly in high-risk countries.

Analyzing the various phases of the economic intelligence process practiced by Moroccan companies highlights the importance of influence as a key factor for the success of long-term strategies.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) initiative has further amplified the need to develop economic intelligence capabilities within Moroccan companies. The current challenge lies in promoting this practice as a competitive advantage, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) planning to expand into African markets.

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