

Innovative Startups for Agricultural and Rural Development in Algeria: The Case of the AgriPremium Incubator

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Abstract:

The paper aims to analyse a form of rural entrepreneurship based on innovative start-ups and its role in agricultural development. Rural entrepreneurship is not limited to traditional agricultural activities. Moreover, the case of specific innovative agricultural projects will be presented in the form of startups incubated in the AgriPremium incubator. The aim is to understand the extent of these new forms of innovative entrepreneurial support which can contribute to agricultural and rural development in Algeria. Based on data provided from the Ministry, the National Chamber of Agriculture and the incubator, the analysis shows the positive outcomes of this emerging approach in Algeria.

Keywords : rural entrepreneurship, innovation, startups, incubator. AgriPremium

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I- Introduction:

As part of its national policy of food security and diversification of the national economy, Algeria has decided to follow the various developments characterizing the socio-economic environment in the world. Indeed, information and communication technologies and the many forms of innovation that are constantly shaking up the world make their adoption an imperative. The curse of the rentier economy has made Algeria a country that has sacrificed its potential and wealth for years. Today, however, this issue has become one of the priorities of the national strategy, which essentially concerns agriculture, with the aim not only of achieving self-sufficiency, but also of making Algeria an exporter of agricultural products. To achieve this, the entrepreneurial spirit and culture form the basis of this structural logic. Algeria has adopted several measures to raise awareness, encourage, finance and support entrepreneurship in all its forms. These include the creation of various loan monitoring structures for projects, particularly in the form of innovative startups.

Innovation affects all sectors of economic activity. The difficulty of analyzing it, particularly in the agricultural sector, lies in the complexity of the multitude of players who maintain relationships and mobilize resources to create new, innovative products¹. Innovation is linked to major development issues, such as agro-ecological innovation, social innovation, territorial innovation and so on. In our societies, innovation has become a key issue. It is omnipresent in the discourse of economic and political players, and is embodied in the figure of the contemporary start-up hero (FAURE Guy et al., 2018, p1). Moreover, these various innovations in the agricultural sector coincide with the multiple transformations that society is undergoing today, hence the interest of its analysis.

The vulnerability of populations, which manifests itself essentially in socio-economic poverty, is one of the most complex problems in the world. And among the most vulnerable sectors of the population are those living in rural areas. Moreover, the challenges of revitalizing rural activities in their various forms will enable the creation of added value and territorial development.

In this context, our research aims to understand the role of innovative startups in rural development, based on the new form of support provided by agricultural incubators, as in the case of the AgriPrenium incubator.

Methodologically, we relied on a qualitative study by conducting interviews with the managers of the AgriPrenium incubator and the national chamber of agriculture that gave birth to it, an evaluation study of the Ministry's incubator balance sheet and finally the analysis of a few documents retrieved on this incubator.

Our presentation will be divided into three main sections. The first will return to the concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation. The second will look at incubators as support structures for innovative startups. The third will be devoted to a case study of the AgriPrenium incubator.

I. Entrepreneurship and innovation

Entrepreneurship can be defined as economic activity created by an individual launching new products, services and/or markets with the aim of generating value (OECD, 2011). According to Benata M., (2015), three components need to be studied in interaction in order to understand the field of entrepreneurship: the individual, the organization (as form and as action) and the environment (socio-economic context). (SMADI A., 2018)

1.1. Entrepreneur

Jaziri R. and Paturel R., (2015) drawing on the work of Shane S. and Venkataraman S. (2000) define entrepreneurship by reference to the person seizing opportunities (new products and/or services) and the effects of the business created.

Fillion L-J., (1997) presents entrepreneurship as a field of study of entrepreneurial practices. These relate to the nature of the activities created, the profile of entrepreneurs (socio- demographic characteristics) and their economic and social contribution. In addition, he integrates into the analysis of entrepreneurship the support and assistance granted to entrepreneurs to facilitate their activities.

The entrepreneur is seen as a dynamic player (Fayolle A., 2011) in society, playing a particular role, generating socio-economic development impacts. The presence of entrepreneurs in society enables the production of wealth according to the entrepreneur, his activity and his aspirations (types of entrepreneurs). According to Hernandez E-M. and Marco L., (2006, 14), the entrepreneur represents "the initiator of a complex process of opportunity detection and exploitation acting in a given economic, historical, socio-cultural and technological context". According to the author, this definition refers to four key concepts summarizing the phenomenon of business creation by an entrepreneur. The entrepreneur is characterized by his or her initiative (initiator) with regard to the origin of the idea to create the company. When embarking on the process of creating an organization, the entrepreneur must take into consideration the time dimension crucial to the operation of the business created. The entrepreneur's commitment to the creation of a business implies a complex process in relation to the diversity of elements to be taken into consideration and their interdependence. Finally, seizing an opportunity by locating and identifying a share of the market ahead of the others will enable the entrepreneur to succeed in his planned project.

1.2. Entrepreneurship and innovation

Innovation also means taking risks, because the entrepreneur cannot anticipate with certainty what the market will be like in the future. How will consumers react to their product? How will competitors react? (Blandine LAPERCHÉ, 2005, P66)

According to Schumpeter, the entrepreneur is often behind breakthrough innovations (Fayolle A., 2005). However, innovation does not always mean or imply a breakthrough. It can take the form of simple modifications to the offering, generating competitiveness

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on the market (Fayolle A. 2011). In addition, it contributes to development through the creation of new businesses and job opportunities, thus helping to renew and restructure the economic fabric. It is the guarantor of creative destruction, which itself generates industrial dynamism and long-term growth (Jaziri R. and Paturel R., 2015). Julien P-A. and Marchesnay M., (1996) share Schumpeter J.'s (1935) view that innovation is the driving force behind entrepreneurship. It constitutes a market upheaval, since it enables a change in new ideas and consequently offers new products (goods or services). We can define it as creating something different by discovering new products, or even by transforming existing ones - in other words, doing things differently. "The successful introduction on the market of a new product, a new manufacturing process or even a new organizational form of the company" (Benamar and Foued, 2012, P1). Julien P-A. and Marchesnay M., (1996, 35) consider innovation to be the foundation of entrepreneurship, since it enables us to "create a business different from what we knew before, to discover or transform a product, to propose a new way of making, distributing or selling". Indeed, innovation is linked to new ideas that have an impact on the company, either by producing new goods and/or services, or by reorganizing the company. The entrepreneur becomes a vector of economic development through innovation, by seeking out sources of innovation, by bringing about change, by identifying opportunities before they are discovered by others, but also by mastering technological tools to ensure the realization of his achievements (Rajhi N., 2011). Porter. M., (1999, 11) establishes a direct link between innovation and market competition, because the latter contributes considerably to the selection and survival of companies, noting that "competition is central to the success or failure of firms. It sanctions the activities of a firm that contribute to its results". From this perspective, the definition attributed to the entrepreneur, highlighting the innovation paradigm, by Jaziri R. and Paturel R., (2015, 7) corresponding to "an individual in search of an optimal situation in his investment decision. The entrepreneur's fundamental role will therefore be to set up a new structure using an approach that reveals his or her qualities as an innovator, organizer, strategist, etc.". The entrepreneur participates in the development of the economy and society by bringing about change. According to the same author, this change is one of the ordinary principles of the opportunistic entrepreneur.

For J.A. Schumpeter, the entrepreneur is the economic agent who realizes new combinations of production. He identifies five possible combinations: creation of a new product; introduction of a new production method; opening up of new markets; discovery of a new source of raw materials or semi-processed products; new productive organization (such as the creation of a cartel between different companies in the same sector of activity). (Blandine LAPERCHE , 2005, P66)

Schumpeter likens this innovation function to that of creative destruction. He explains that the emergence of a new company puts old companies that do not innovate or renew themselves on the market in a situation or possibility of disappearance, due to their inability to face up to competition. On the other hand, these same companies can seize this opportunity and create new products and activities on the market. The Schumpeterian innovation function is a trigger for new activities. Since Schumpeter's time, the role of the innovative entrepreneur has been recognized, as he is able to generate strong competition in

the market with the novelty he brings to the table. As a result of the innovation function, Schumpeter's creative destruction allows certain activities and/or companies to be called into question, and encourages them to renew and monitor developments (resulting from the effects of innovation). With the knock- on effects of competition, the innovation function pushes existing companies to become more efficient, if they are not to disappear, and thus contribute to the country's economic growth.

An innovation is the design of a new or improved product or process (or combination of both) that differs significantly from a unit's previous products or processes, and has been made available to potential users (product) or implemented by the unit (process). The innovation process is based on two components: the role of knowledge as the foundation of innovation, novelty and utility, the creation or preservation of value as the presumed objective of innovation (OECD, 2018 cited by Rania TEGAOUA & Bouchama CHOUAM, 2023, p460).

The need to reduce the number of consumers requires innovation, not only in technology but also in the shape, colour and symbols attached to objects. In this context

Bérangère Szostak Tapon considers that the institutional environment and organisations have a crucial role to play in the evolution of the idea that a designer's creativity is not a luxury, but a social necessity and a criterion for a company's success. (Blandine LAPERCHE , 2005, P21).

On the one hand, innovation is a means of circumventing the risk arising from the context of uncertainty, itself the product of market fluctuations. The innovative entrepreneur defines the boundaries of his own market and sets his own rules in order to control the uncertainty inherent in the way the market operates (Blandine LAPERCHE , 2005, P66-67).

Innovation is therefore understood as the introduction of new modes of production, new practices - today we would say new economic models - and not just as the introduction of new technologies. The word entrepreneur should be taken in its broadest sense. It does not necessarily mean a company founder, but it can be a company, large or small, a department or even a business unit that introduces a breakthrough into its environment, and therefore has an entrepreneurial attitude. According to Schumpeter, the introduction of this break has a dual effect: firstly, it destroys old structures and practices, and secondly, it creates new ones. Economic evolution thus occurs in a cycle of "creative destruction", where the old gives way to the new through a process of radical innovation" (Jean-Yves PRAX, Bernard BUISSON, Philippe SILBERZAH, 2005, p22).

The different types of innovation

1. Incremental innovation: when innovation is based on the skills and assets of existing players, and the impact on consumer habits and behavior is low (introducing an option on a car, for example). Jean -yves PRAX, Bernard BUISSON, Phillipe SILBERZAH, 2005, P50
2. Major innovation: characterized by a strong impact on consumer habits, but does not call into question the skills of established players. (Introducing Internet banking services

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requires the know-how of the banks). Jean -yves PRAX, Bernard BUISSON, Phillipe SILBERZAH , 2005, p50

3. Strategic innovation: when the impact on consumer habits is limited, and innovations call into question, or even destroy, the skills of assets accumulated over many years. (e.g. plasma/traditional TV). Jean -yves PRAX, Bernard BUISSON, Phillipe SILBERZAH, 2005, P50

4. Radical innovation: when innovation jeopardizes the skills and assets of established firms, and triggers a major impact on consumer habits. The example of the mobile/fixed phone. Jean -yves PRAX, Bernard BUISSON, Phillipe SILBERZAH, 2005, P51

Bertrand BELLON (2002, P5), on the other hand, defines 3 types of innovation:

1. Minor incremental improvements: these are the multitude of day-to-day improvements that each employee or group of employees introduces into existing products or manufacturing processes: better machine settings, changes in product composition to improve strength or aesthetics.

2. Radical: larger in scale and more individualized, they represent a complete and irreversible break in processes.

3.Technological: ICT

According to this typology, innovation does not necessarily refer to a major technological leap that would imply radical changes in the life of the company, sanctioned by total and definitive success or failure. According to Bertrand BELLON (2002, pIII), innovation concerns any organization that is expected to introduce a change of any magnitude, from a small modification to a major upheaval. Indeed, according to the same author, "innovation is a deliberate, concerted and precise act that begins with an idea and ends with its implementation". We don't generally innovate for the sake of it (although that does happen), but to respond to new competitive conditions; either in reaction to them, or to get ahead of them. Whatever the case, innovation is always validated or invalidated by whether or not it strengthens the company's financial and competitive position" (Bertrand BELLON, 2002, P3).

1.1. Rural entrepreneurship and innovation

It is this entrepreneurial spirit that adds value to rural resources in rural areas and mobilizes rural human resources. It presents the following challenges:

- Promoting professional integration
- Generate income
- Opening up rural areas
- Reduce rural exodus
- Enhancing know-how and skills
- Developing identity/image

R. ALLAL (2018), in presenting the profile and qualities of a rural entrepreneur, defines him by his ability to consider rural society as his own family and a knowledge of how to adopt a managerial style with a strong human dimension (see figure below).

Figure 1: Quality of an entrepreneur



Source: made by us based on observation and managers' interviews

According to the same author, rural entrepreneurship projects are linked to myths:

- *Small-scale projects*
- *Lack of innovation*
- *High risk*
- *Absence of the digital/ICT dimension.*

I. Incubators as support structures for innovative startups

2.1. Startups

The term star-up can sometimes be controversial, because it is defined and understood in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Firstly, it is understood as:

□ "A human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty". It can also be understood as "a distinct 'atomic' work unit, adapted to a highly uncertain environment, and provides the conditions required to build a portfolio of internal start-ups" (ERIC RIES, 2018, p4 , 18).

□ It is an innovative company that is just starting out and has strong growth potential and targets a very large market (Bortolini et al. 2018)

□ In OECD countries, young companies, mainly start-ups, are responsible for more than 2/3 of job creation and grow faster than other companies. (Boissin et al.; 2019)

□ People working in start-ups are multi-taskers. They take on many roles and perform many functions.

□ This is a group of people whose aim is to design and offer new goods and services to a market where the level of risk and uncertainty is very high (Ries Eric ,2011)

□ It is an organisation that is looking for a reproducible and extensible business model, it is an organisation that experiments and tests its market in order to subsequently find an established economic model. (Black and Drof, 2012)

□ This is the first phase in the life cycle of a future business. During this phase, entrepreneurs are looking for and discovering solutions that will enable them to satisfy customer needs and face up to tough competition by creating a competitive advantage (Kidder, 2012).

□ A start-up is a company that does not clearly know: what is its product? Who are its customers? How to make money? As soon as it discovers the three principles, it ceases to be a startup and becomes a real business. (McClure, 2013)

□ Startup status is reserved for companies that have high growth potential, use new technology and have a high need for funding. (Fridenson, 2015)

- To go from Zero to One, to transform an idea into a business, to find a new way of providing a service, to create value. (Thiel, 2021)

2.2. Incubators

2.2.1. Definitions

"It offers the initiator a number of services, including financial assistance, management advice, administrative support and everything needed to transform an initial idea into a newproduct" (MANCER I., 2021, p448).

In Algeria, the establishment of incubators is governed by law no. 01-18 of December 12, 2001 (article 12), which sets up institutions to support SMEs, known as "pépinière d'entreprises".

"The incubator is a place to welcome and support project carriers, especially innovative projects, for a well-defined period and where logistical, administrative and consulting services are offered. The mission of incubators is to facilitate the marketing of innovative companies, products and processes" KOURAICHE N., 2018, p).

In Algeria Executive Decree no. 12-293 corresponding to July 21, 2012, setting the missions, organization and operation of joint scientific and technological research services defines the university incubator as: *"a structure for hosting and supporting an innovative project with a direct link to research, and which helps the project holder formalize their idea and validate its long-term feasibility. It offers project leaders support in terms of training, advice, financing and accommodates them until the company is created" (see 29 cited by KOURAICHE N., 2018, p).*

Incubators are support structures for business start-ups. They comprise specialized resources dedicated to supporting and assisting companies prior to their creation. They seek to put these companies in touch with business networks, particularly financial ones. (Berreziga. 2013, p 117).

BROOKS (1986), defines the incubator as a provider of *"small, flexible rents for low-cost space; a pool of shared office services to reduce overheads; some forms of professional and managerial assistance; and access to or assistance in acquiring start-up capital"*, (quoted by MASMOUDI, 2007, P 72). We note that the incubator is a structure that offers rent, financing, equipment and start-up capital.

The French Ministry of Research defines an incubator for innovative companies as *"a place to welcome and support people with projects to create innovative companies; it offers them support in terms of training, advice and financing, and houses them until*

they find their place in a business incubator or industrial premises", (quoted by MASMOUDI, 2007, page 74). CULP (1990), ALLEN and MCCLUSKEY (1990) define the incubator as a facilitator offering services to creators.

The incubator provides accommodation for start-ups, or clients. They are offered a network of shared resources, accompanied by management support (business, accounting techniques, organizational skills, administration, marketing, trade, etc.), provided by a group of experts,

practitioners and academics delegated by the incubator's top management (DJERMANE, 2003).

For HACKETT and DILTS (2004), incubators are organizations that facilitate the emergence and development of businesses, by offering services and basic needs.

The incubator intervenes before the actual creation of the company, in a number of ways, such as individualized coaching, training and transmission of experience from the field.

2.2.2. The essential missions of an incubator

CULLIERE (2003) specifies some of the activities of incubators, saying that they *"essentially revolve around the training of creators. The aim is to train them in their future profession and enable them to set up more realistic projects. Above all, it's a question of providing them with grey matter and relational networks. The skills to be developed relate to business management as well as to the planned activity. Incubators also facilitate the creation process by providing logistical resources"* p80. In this definition, the author emphasizes the incubator's role in training entrepreneurs.

Its main missions can be summarized as follows:

- provide a network of contacts
- save time
- provide advice in various fields
- provide training in entrepreneurship, management, marketing, financial management, accounting, intellectual property, business law, etc.

Unlike a business incubator, an incubator is aimed at young companies or those still setting up, and offers them a range of adapted services (M. DJELTI, 2016).

2.2.3. Types of incubator

Albert & al (2003) distinguish five types of incubator.

- **Economic and local development incubators, created by governments** to promote entrepreneurship and job creation.
- **Academic incubators within universities**, aimed at valorizing research results.
- **Technology incubators** to promote high-tech projects.

- Profit-driven **private incubators**.
- **Social incubators** aimed at creating jobs and integrating certain social categories (Bakkali,Messeghem, & Sammut, 2010, p. 152).

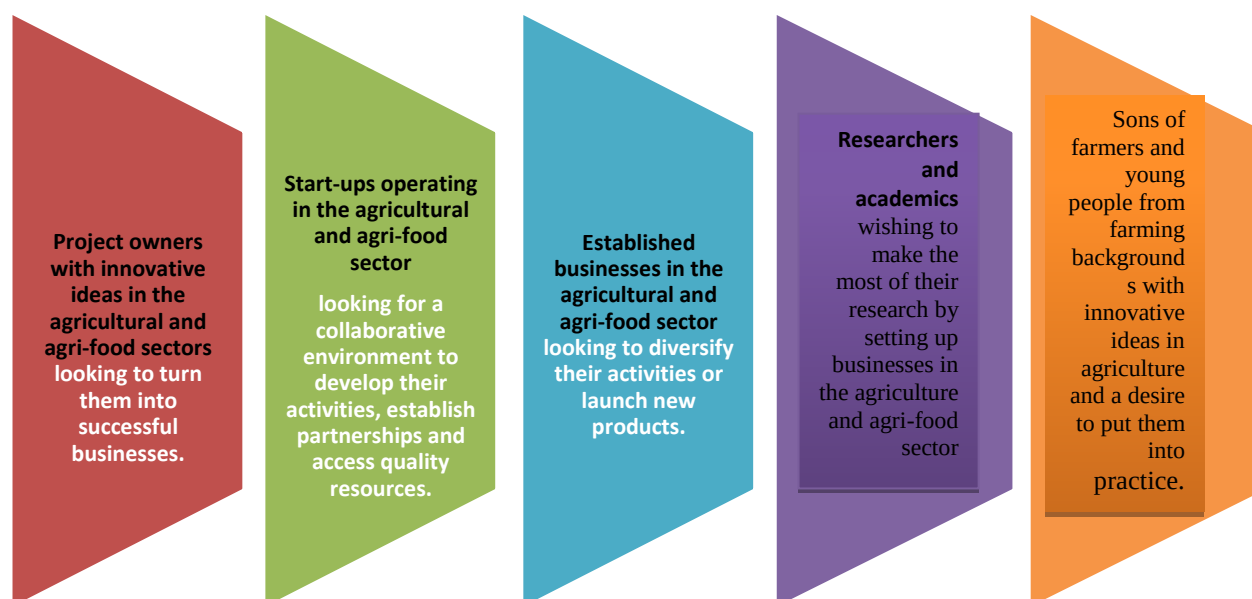
II. Case study of the AgriPrenium incubator

Algeria faces major challenges in agriculture and the food industry, particularly in terms of food security, agricultural productivity and economic diversification. In this context, the National Chamber of Agriculture's AgriPrenium incubator is positioning itself as a key entity aimed at stimulating innovation and supporting the development of startups in these strategic sectors. In other words, it encourages startups proposing innovative and sustainable solutions to improve agricultural production, distribution, processing, ventilation and consumption of food products.

3.1. Introducing the AgriPrenium incubator

The AgriPrenium incubator is aimed at:

Figure 2 : Target group by The AgriPrenium incubator



Source: made by us based on observation and managers' interviews

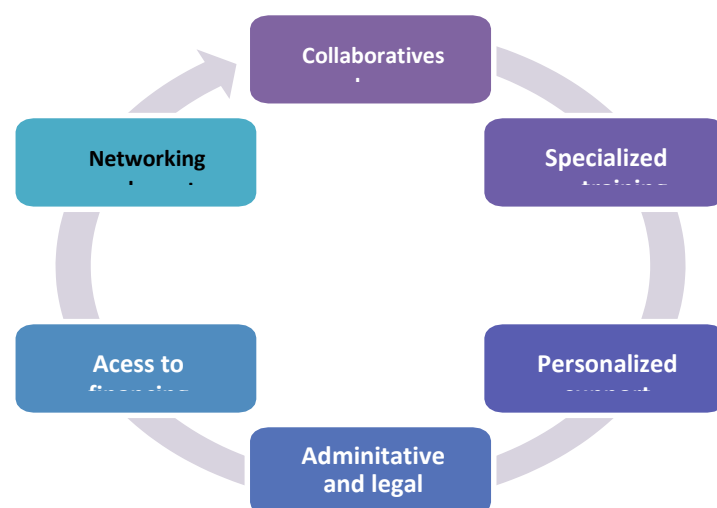
In 2022, the Agriprenium incubator launched a nationwide call for young project leaders. A total of 250 proposals were received, demonstrating the interest of project leaders in agricultural innovation.

The projects were selected in two stages. The first is the **Pre-Selection Phase**, which evaluates the relevance, innovation and viability of the projects submitted. This stage enabled us to select the 20 most promising projects out of the 250 submitted. The second is the **Jury Presentation Phase**, made up of representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Higher Education, as well as seasoned professionals from the sector. Its aim is to assess the development potential and ability of applicants to present their innovative ideas, and to select 7 projects to benefit from the incubation program.

During this process, the candidates were assessed on the basis of criteria such as project relevance, level of innovation, motivation and commitment, as well as their ability to apply the knowledge acquired during the training courses.

The Agriprenium incubator has put in place a comprehensive set of incubation programs designed to help selected projects succeed. These programs are delivered by **Qualified Trainers and Experts** to provide candidates with the knowledge and skills essential to the effective management of their projects. These programs take the form of either **Group and Individual Training** (entrepreneurship, project management, communication and business plan design) or **Specialized Workshops** (organized to deepen candidates' knowledge of specific subjects such as intellectual property, innovation in agriculture, etc.).

Figure 3: AgriPrenium incubator services



Source: made by us based on observation and managers' interviews

Creating an entrepreneurial ecosystem

Networking events are organized to enable candidates to meet industry experts, investors and other potential partners, and expand their network of contacts. Moreover, the **Salon International Numide de l'Agriculture** organized in Constantine was an opportunity for candidates to benefit from personalized support. In addition, **Partnership Negotiations** with private incubators, academic institutions, research institutes and renowned universities such as INRAA, CRSTRA, ENSA, ACSAAD and ITDAS aim to create an ecosystem conducive to innovation and sustainable development in Algeria's agricultural sector. To achieve this, the Agriprenium incubator has used a variety of communication tools (social media, television, radio, press releases, a Facebook page and a LinkedIn account) to attract the attention of potential customers, strategic partners and investors, creating opportunities for enhanced collaboration. **In setting up this entrepreneurial ecosystem**, AgriPrenium's role is to offer a dynamic environment, quality resources and personalized support to project leaders, innovative initiatives and startups operating in the agriculture and agrifood sectors. Its mission is to encourage innovation, foster the creation of sustainable jobs, actively contribute to Algeria's economic development and meet the challenges facing the country's agricultural and agrifood sector.

Conclusion

After reviewing the theoretical framework related to our problem, i.e. innovative entrepreneurship in the form of start-ups and their impact on the rural environment, we analysed the case of the AgriPrenium incubator as one of the structures supporting entrepreneurs in the creation of their innovative projects in order to contribute to agricultural and rural development in Algeria.

However, our results remain limited for two reasons. The first is that our case study of the recently created AgriPrenium incubator is limited to an evaluation of one year's work. The second, however, relates to the second part of our survey of incubatees who have taken training courses within this incubator, which is still underway, as we have encountered difficulties in retrieving our questionnaires.

This does not prevent us from saying that this first experience with start-ups remains a first step towards the development of agriculture by introducing innovation into the future projects created. And this is thanks to the willingness of the public authorities to focus on this specific category to help them turn their innovative ideas into reality.

Our initial analysis highlights a number of recommendations:

- Review the incubation period for these start-ups, so that they can better nurture their innovative ideas, which are designed to cope with an uncertain market;
- Enrich training programmes to ensure that projects are kept in check by their promoters;
- Increase the number of winners in the competition organised to enable several projects to see the light of day;
- Increase the incubator's capacity to accommodate a larger number of project leaders;
- Clarify the issue of funding for these innovative projects, which is still unclear to start-ups.
- Complete the legal framework put in place to create a degree of trust between start-ups and the surrounding entrepreneurial ecosystem
- Collaborate with other types of incubator (public-private partnerships).
- Include the university in the training program for project leaders to complement the work of professionals. The best example of this is the integration of farmers' children (for the second edition), giving them this opportunity in recognition of their mastery and experience in the field at the same time. This once again demonstrates the desire to improve on the shortcomings of the first edition.

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