
Development cooperation and Covid-19. Del Re: "Synergistic collaboration for effective responses"

Italian development cooperation efforts in Africa continue. Despite the slow but steady spread of Covid-19, through old and new projects the ongoing efforts of Italian NGO workers sustain the lives of numerous populations victims of critical situations, to say the least. We broached the subject with **Emanuela Del Re**, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, who has held a series of video conferences with the leading Italian stakeholders in the past few days aimed at addressing the main problems that cooperation activities are facing as a result of the pandemic emergency. **Covid-19 and the African Continent: are there up-to-date statistics that provide a clear picture of the situation to date?** Africa is also facing Covid-19. More than 13,000 cases have been reported so far in Africa, 60% of which in Sub-Saharan Africa and more or less 25% in South Africa. But the data are constantly changing. *African States are taking increasingly drastic measures to cope with the emergency situation.* For example, a night curfew has been imposed in Egypt. In most African countries marketplaces are closed, sporting and cultural events are suspended, and religious and political meetings are banned. The military is occasionally deployed to ensure compliance with the measures. Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been isolated from the rest of the country to slow down the spread of the virus. A state of emergency has been declared everywhere, for more or less long periods of time. For example, in Sierra Leone, which has still no confirmed case of Covid-19, the state of emergency has been declared for one year. **Is there an economic plan to stem the damage caused by Covid-19 in Africa?** Two weeks ago, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa estimated the economic impact of the emergency on the continent at US\$ 30 billion. I have to say, however, that this amount is too small. Suffice it to say that Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia, Nobel Peace Prize winner 2019, called upon the G20 to unlock a US\$150 billion emergency package for Africa, including debt cancellation or restructuring measures, *bearing in mind that Covid-19 poses a serious existential threat to the economies of all African countries.* **What is the impact of the pandemic on the Italian cooperation system (in Africa and beyond)?** We are going through an exceptional period, unprecedented in our time, the largest-scale health emergency since the post-war period. *We are all involved, from north to south, from east to west, and all together we must work synergistically to deliver successful responses.* At the Ministry, work continues unceasingly. In the last few days I held a series of video conferences with leading Italian partners in international cooperation. We talked about the major challenges faced by cooperation activities as a result of the pandemic emergency. **What measures are you taking?** Complicated months lie ahead that will probably also involve a redefinition of the initiatives and planning of all development cooperation activities in the light of the current emergency. Everything will be adjusted according to the changing circumstances. We are in the process of consulting with the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation of the Foreign Ministry, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and all stakeholders involved in the cooperation structure, identifying needs, requirements and proposals. New priorities obviously include the fight against Covid-19 and all that this entails: increasingly targeted programmes in the area of public health and prevention, dedicated awareness actions especially for the most vulnerable groups that are more exposed to contagion, as well as increased support to local communities. *These are areas of intervention that we have already been working on for some time but given the ongoing emergency they need to be reconsidered so as to optimize resources, efforts and needs, always listening to "grassroots concerns", in collaboration and partnership with local communities and constantly guided by the same major "Italian" values that inspire us and guide our action.* **How is the situation at the moment?** Fluctuating and unevenly spread. In some parts of Africa, for example, there are very few infections, but it is feared that they may increase, while other countries on the continent have already closed their borders. Also the situation in Central America is rapidly evolving, as in the Middle East,

where in some countries internal mobility and public gathering limits were already in force at the end of February. *It's hard to predict how NGO activities will evolve in the coming months.* AICS has granted extra-contractual extensions for 4 months to those who request them (civil society organizations, local authorities, universities, businesses) in order to give everyone the opportunity and the time to understand how to proceed, and how to reorganize their future activity. This will largely depend on the partner country implementing the initiatives and on how Covid-19 will have spread in the same Country. **More specifically, what initiatives have been put in place to stem the negative impact of Covid-19 on our Cooperation efforts?** Since the beginning of the pandemic a "Covid-19 Emergency Technical Panel" has been operating to provide all the necessary support and to "put into writing", alongside all Italian Cooperation operators, a set of guidelines to best address the current situation. We are constantly in touch with all involved parties. Our main objective is to respond to the emergency situation and prevent the discontinuation of the "cooperation system." We are working to *ensure the continuation of as many activities and projects as possible, trying to meet their needs and requests* both in terms of bureaucratic-administrative aspects and in terms of "financial support." **Could you give some examples?** We are working to extend non-contractual agreements along with the exceptional management of initiatives financed/co-financed by Italian Cooperation. CSOs have requested additional funds to support the projects. A deep and thorough reflection is underway, in agreement with the other ministries, the Ministry of the Economy and Finances and Labour and Social Policies above all. The "Cura-Italia" Decree provides for interventions for the Voluntary Sector that, pending amendments, can be improved with a view to enhancing their effectiveness and performance. **What is being done by the Foreign Ministry to assist our NGO workers abroad? Some want to return but others wish to stay on...** The Foreign Ministry has already repatriated more than 30,000 Italian nationals from abroad. Many more will be repatriated in the next few days and weeks because special flights are still being organised and all those who expressly request them will be assisted on site. In close coordination with the Crisis Unit, the Directorate General for Development Cooperation of the Foreign Ministry, AICS, AICS offices abroad and our diplomatic representations, and constantly in contact with CSO networks, the Secretariat is committed to providing all the necessary support to our staff abroad and to all NGO workers. Moreover, individual CSOs, in coordination with CSO networks, have already drawn up lists with the contact details of all our staff operating abroad. And these lists, which constitute a census of the Italian Agency workers operating abroad, have already been shared with the competent diplomatic authorities. *Many NGO workers have decided to stay and continue with their activities as much as possible.* Many of those who were based in remote and inaccessible areas have returned to the larger cities because curfew and lockdown regulations are now widespread. **The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects (on public health, the economy, finance, society, development, etc.) are also raising questions about the future (medium and long term) of Development Cooperation, new programmes and priorities, new urgencies and investments and stronger synergies, for example with UN agencies. Is this likely to happen?** It certainly is. The global structure of development cooperation is evolving internationally on two levels: first of all to ensure an immediate health response to the pandemic; and secondly to provide an economic, social and developmental solution to face its consequences, and each stakeholder must do its part. As an Italian body we have already expressed the need, in this new context, for utmost coordination. The Covid-19 pandemic is spreading on a global scale and is affecting not only Western societies and countries that are best prepared from a health and socio-economic point of view, but also large areas of the world with more fragile health systems, whose populations are living in situations of constant humanitarian emergency, especially as a result of continuing armed conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Libya just to name a few examples), extreme climatic events (droughts and floods, or the hurricanes that hit the African continent last year), and epidemics (e.g. Ebola). The spread of Covid-19 in these areas would represent an "emergency within an emergency", and a very difficult challenge to overcome. **In other words, "fuel is being added to the fire"...** That's correct. In these areas of the world,

access to water, food, sanitation, healthcare, or basic education is largely made possible thanks to the solidarity and support of the international community. Global humanitarian needs were already of huge proportions before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the international community was already strongly committed to continuing to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to people in situations of particular vulnerability, starting with refugees and displaced persons, notably women and children. *Refugee camps and informal settlements in different areas of the world raise serious concerns for relief agencies especially because of difficulties in implementing measures for the prevention and containment of the virus* that many countries, starting with Italy, have long since started to adopt **What kind of response is being planned?** In this regard, the United Nations and the International Red Cross Movement have recently presented two humanitarian response plans, the first one amounting to USD 2 billion and the second to CHF 800 million, identifying specific objectives and areas of intervention. At this time, as international appeals are multiplying, it's important to pool and coordinate available forces and resources. Although Italy is among the most affected countries, we must not forget that as a Member State of the European Union, the G7 and the G20, as well as an important cooperation partner, we cannot fail to make our contribution to the global response. We have contributed to the response plan implemented by the WHO and we also count on contributing to the global humanitarian appeal launched by UN Secretary General Guterres with all the agencies. *This pandemic poses a huge risk to sustainable development and growth.* Of course, cooperation programmes will be adapted to deal with its consequences, but we must also ensure that we are prepared for the next crises. **Does health protection take priority?** Today we are all becoming increasingly aware of the central importance of health and of strengthening healthcare systems, which, in fact, is a traditional priority area of Italian cooperation, one in which we have always obtained excellent results. I would therefore like to seize this opportunity to express my deepest and most sincere thanks to all the health and humanitarian workers working in Italy and throughout the world, to the humanitarian branch of the United Nations, to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, to the numerous workers of Civil Society organizations, engaged in the front line with professionalism and abnegation. *My message to them is that Italy, despite the tragic situation we are going through, will continue to be at their side in the name of the solidarity principle that has always characterized the history of our country.* Pope Francis reminded us that "no one saves himself": I would like to convey my heartfelt gratitude to all those in the world - and in our own country - who are making tangible and concrete gestures of empathy and solidarity. **Italy has always been a leading country in the field of international cooperation. How many Italian Cooperation projects are currently being carried out in developing countries, how many NGO workers are involved and with how many funds?** Last year there were over 1,000 operational projects and we granted a total of over €300 million in funding for direct interventions in partner countries. Civil Society organizations play a fundamental role in this challenging activity: according to a rough estimate of the Networks of Civil Society organizations, today approximately 1,500 workers are involved in the implementation of projects in various parts of the world and especially in Africa. **In the light of your long-standing experience in this field, how would you describe the population of Italian NGO workers all over the world, especially those who have decided to remain close to the peoples affected by the virus, adding on to other chronic difficulties?** I commend the commitment of our NGO workers who are continuing their valuable work despite the conditions imposed by the ongoing emergency situation. Theirs is a noble and generous choice. This further testifies to Italy's empathy with the world, in total awareness that the war against the virus must be fought with a global approach, in different places, on different fronts but with the same effectiveness. *We can implement many strategies with individual gestures and targeted policies to expand this community. But we cannot do it alone.* We have a responsibility to act for ourselves but also for all those who look to us with hope. Many people living in the most fragile countries and experiencing the direst living conditions (refugees, Syrians, Yemenites and others) have expressed their solidarity with the people of Italy, which truly honours us. It makes us understand that it is finally

necessary to adopt an all-embracing global vision, starting from fundamental values such as solidarity.

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