

# SLOVAK DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN 2019

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2019 brought with it a number of new strategies, instruments and policies. Nevertheless, the old demons returned and our foreign policy and values continued to be undermined.

Two main topics dominated – migration and private sector involvement in development cooperation. While migration framed both the beginning and end of the year, caused heated debates, was the reason minister Miroslav Lajčák submitted his resignation to the president (he later withdrew it) and was a politicized in the parliamentary election campaigns at the end of the year, private sector involvement has attracted less public and social media attention and been less prone to open misuse by politicians. Nonetheless both are equally important for development cooperation.

A special Eurobarometer from June 2019 shows that Slovaks are less likely than average to agree that it is important to help people in developing countries. (74 per cent, EU average 86 per cent). This represented a decline of 10 percentage points on the previous survey.

But we experienced good moments as well. Two of the main interactions between NGOs represented by Ambrela (formerly the NGDO Platform) and the Foreign Ministry proved that dialogue and communication are skill key to any change. The debates and consultations resulted in the adoption of a new ODA instrument – strategic partnerships (or “block grants”) to be piloted in 2020, and an increase of €1.5 million in the overall Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC) budget for grants.

The new Medium-term Strategy for Development Cooperation for 2019–2023<sup>1</sup> entered into force and the Foreign Ministry deployed another (its third) development diplomat to Georgia.

For the first time since its adoption in 2015, the Act on Development Cooperation<sup>2</sup> was amended and Eximbanka's status as a development actor was strengthened.

The Slovak OSCE Chairmanship attempted to take small (yet practical) steps toward settling the conflict in Ukraine. Development cooperation also featured in Slovakia's other two 2019 presidencies (of the OECD and especially the V4).

2019 was the first year in which the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was assessed. The OECD development cooperation report<sup>3</sup> noted that we need a new narrative and to change the way we "do" development cooperation. The question is, do we know how to do this and who will be the changemaker?

## WALKING IN A CIRCLE: FRAGMENTATION OR A REGIONAL APPROACH?

A year has passed since the 2019–2023 medium-term strategy (Strategy) entered into force, so it is time to look at what it contains and how it is put into practice.

In 2003 Slovakia stopped being a recipient country and became a donor country. In January 2019 the Strategy came into force, marking the fourth five-year cycle of ODA.<sup>4</sup>

In the previous 2014–2018 strategy the focus was on ten recipient countries. With the so-called "migration crises," the list was expanded to include Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. The funding for humanitarian aid was substantially increased and humanitarian projects became an inherent part of the SAIDC portfolio. This enables Slovak NGOs that are the Foreign Ministry's key partners to implement humanitarian projects on a more systematic base.

Looking back there was always a certain geographical flexibility that enabled Slovakia, a reliable international partner, to contribute to solutions to large regional

<sup>1</sup> "Medium-term strategy for development cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2019–2023," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2019. Available online: [https://www.slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/strednodoba\\_strategia\\_rozvojevej\\_spoluprace\\_eng\\_2019-2023\\_644\\_stran\\_final.pdf](https://www.slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/strednodoba_strategia_rozvojevej_spoluprace_eng_2019-2023_644_stran_final.pdf) (accessed on January 30, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> "Zákon z 18. novembra 2015 o rozvojevej spolupráci a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov," [Act on Development Cooperation and amending and supplementing certain acts] *Laws of the Slovak Republic*, No. 392/2015. Available online: [https://slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/zakon\\_392\\_2015\\_o\\_rozvojevej\\_spolupraci.pdf](https://slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/zakon_392_2015_o_rozvojevej_spolupraci.pdf) (accessed on January 30, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Slovak Republic 2019*. OECD's Development Assistance Committee, 2019. Available online: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-slovak-republic-2019-9789264312326-en.htm> (accessed on January 30, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See also "Medium-term strategy for development cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2003–2008," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2004. "Medium-term strategy for development cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2009–2013," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2009; Medium-term strategy for development cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2014 – 2018. Available online: [https://issuu.com/slovakaid/docs/strednodoba\\_strategia\\_oda\\_sr\\_2014-2\\_83963017c1b288](https://issuu.com/slovakaid/docs/strednodoba_strategia_oda_sr_2014-2_83963017c1b288) (accessed on January 30, 2020).

crises. Whether this was done out of instrumental or more altruistic reasons is a matter for debate.

In the second ODA cycle, this flexibility could be seen in the inclusion of Tunisia and Egypt as new ODA recipient countries, which was a response to the Arab Spring. In the subsequent cycle (2009–2013) the conflict in Syria and the worsening situation of refugees in the Middle East was the incentive for including Syria and its neighbors.

The Foreign Ministry presented its “Assessment of the priorities of Slovak foreign and European policy in 2019 and focus for 2020,” at a governmental meeting on February 12, 2020. It states that “the dialogue on migration and counter-terrorism issues should be strengthened, particularly with Egypt, Libya and Morocco.”<sup>5</sup> Although some of the reasons for doing this may be the same<sup>6</sup>, that is, to curb migration to Europe, this would further stretch the already limited capacities of the Slovak ODA system to beyond what is desirable.

Thus the inevitable question we face is, where does the flexibility or regional approach end and where does fragmentation start?

Certainly, flexibility is necessary but it needs to be built around an ODA that is focused, predictable and reflects Slovakia's ODA vision, identity, values and long term goals. Too much flexibility would erode and destabilize the core of ODA. But what is that core? For instance, is it the focus on curbing migration to Europe through development and humanitarian projects or is that a peripheral concern? To what extent should ODA serve foreign trade and private sector purposes?

Of course things are never black and white. But besides thinking of the model as consisting of a center<sup>7</sup> and periphery we can also think of it as a continuum where one end represents instrumentalism and the other altruism. There are other elements that can be considered in strategic thinking about the overall picture. For instance, plan versus reality (or number of strategies on paper but yet to be operationalized or implemented) and systematic versus non-systematic approaches are yet other elements that can be used to stimulate strategic thinking on the overall picture.

The Strategy covers 27 countries rather than the previous 14 countries (including Syria and neighbors), but the SAIDC budget has not been increased.

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<sup>5</sup> “Hodnotenie priorít zahraničnej a európskej politiky Slovenskej republiky v roku 2019 a ich zameranie na rok 2020,” [Assessment of the priorities of Slovakia's foreign and European policy in 2019 and focus for 2020] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2020, p. 5. Available online: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/2686701/2020+Hodnotenie+prior%C3%ADt+zahrani%C4%8Dnej+a+eur%C3%B3pskej+politiky+Slovenskej+republiky+v+roku+2019+a+ich+zameranie+na+rok+2020> (accessed on February 20, 2020). The project in Morocco is a joint initiative between the V4 and Germany worth around €30 million aimed at building the capacities of the Moroccan coast guard and border protection, improving socio-economic conditions for young people, building economic infrastructure and promoting entrepreneurship.

<sup>6</sup> The other main ones could be to counterbalance the Turkish appetite for becoming a stronger regional power and the economic interests of some EU member states in oil-rich Libyan waters. Needless to say that, in North Africa, the humanitarian situation is worst in Libya.

<sup>7</sup> Usually migration related projects are in the core. Development intervention in Afghanistan is probably on the periphery and non-systematic. Kenya plus or the sub-Saharan region are peripheral, non-systematic and more altruistic. Kenya is more systemic, central and altruistic. These categories are somewhat simplistic but can be used to stimulate thinking on strategy and to positively disrupt or challenge the status quo.

The larger number of countries is partly due to the so-called Kenya regional approach that has led to the addition of seven East African countries. Although this territorial flexibility may lead to a positive spillover effect from existing Kenyan projects, it could overstretch Slovak capacities. Slovakia has only two embassies in this region (in Addis Ababa and Nairobi) and it is not clear how the development diplomat in Kenya will be able to work effectively in this vast and diverse East African region, whether in geographic, cultural, economic or security terms. Although it is true that several Slovak NGOs have projects in countries like Uganda or Ethiopia. To think strategically would mean considering how the very slim SlovakAid funding can be used effectively for existing and new initiatives by Slovak actors outside Kenya while simultaneously trying to avoid inefficient single shot and ad hoc support for projects without further plans. There are several options. The small amount of funding (€200,000) could be allocated to a single project or it could be sliced up as seed funding. A model could be designed for testing different approaches, but that would have to be backed up by a solid monitoring and evaluation system and more robust funding would be required for the most successful small projects to grow.

The Strategy<sup>8</sup> states that the principle of leaving no one behind is behind the enlargement (all seven newly added East African countries on the list are in the Least Developed Country (LDC) category). In 2018 no LDC country featured among the top ten ODA recipient countries. In 2019, the total planned allocation for these seven countries was €200,000, representing 0.7 per cent of total bilateral aid in 2018 (total bilateral aid in 2019 is expected to be the same or higher).

But the principle of leaving no one behind should be understood more as a multi-layered approach and as applying to structural poverty that is region and community based and multifaceted. In other words, it is “denationalized” and “degeographized.” It can refer to a marginalized group based on gender, ethnicity, religion and so on.

And then there are countries like Ethiopia and Serbia<sup>9</sup> which were put on hold for five years in the previous cycle and are now back in the game.

Afghanistan received a dwindling amount of Slovak aid (approximately €100,000 annually) but has been replaced by Georgia, a new program country. Here the reasoning behind the regional approach does not explain the 2019 allocation of €300,000 for the whole Eastern Partnership region, including Georgia.

However, the top two recipient countries, Libya and Turkey, barely feature in the strategic documents. In 2018 these two countries received five times more funding (€10.5 million) than all three program/high priority countries together (Kenya, Moldova, Afghanistan; €2 million).

There is no use of an exit strategy generally, nor for Afghanistan or Serbia. Although flexible for political decisions, this complicates the work of Slovak implementers on the ground and makes funding and sustainability less predictable and pushes long term planning into annual cycles. In 2011 the SAIDC allocation for Kenya was €1.4 million. In 2019 that dropped by 50 per cent to €700,000. However, the ministry also attempted to take part in EU joint programming in Kenya and contributed to the EU Trust Fund for Africa as well. Nevertheless the decrease was not strategically planned nor justified.

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<sup>8</sup> “Medium-term strategy for development cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2019–2023,” *op. cit.*, p. 22

<sup>9</sup> Development projects under the Finance Ministry were also implemented in Serbia in this period.

Needless to say that throughout this whole period Kenya has consistently featured among the top three program countries.

The new strategy kept blurring the line between program and project countries.

If we zoom out to take a bird's eye perspective, there are four to five priority regions, namely the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership countries, East Africa and the Middle East, while significant funding also goes to countries such as Libya, Turkey, Afghanistan and Morocco.<sup>10</sup> I leave it to the reader to assess whether this geographic scope reflects Slovak capacities.

## GOALS AND SECTORS

Despite the DAC OECD peer review recommendation that a sectoral and geographic focus should be adopted, the Strategy has broader goals. On paper at least the previous strategy (2014–2018) had two main goals: human development in partner countries, primarily through supporting education and employment; and democracy, good governance and dialogue between civil society and state institutions. The second goal was aligned with something that can be seen as Slovakia's comparative advantage, its transition experience: building the institutions of an independent state, developing a market economy and adhering to the principles of democracy, as well as successful integration into international organizations and associations.

The Strategy contains a number of additional goals, like conflict prevention, dealing with the causes of migration through job creation, promoting food safety, eradicating poverty, mitigating climate change, promoting sustainable use of natural resources, encouraging effective water and forest management, securing access to water and sanitation and improving the economic and social resilience of communities. The relationship between the goals and the sectors is unclear.

The Strategy regroups the previous seven sectoral priorities into six without any major changes.

In the first year SAIDC supported eight renewable energy and WASH projects; seven projects related to building the institutions of an independent state, developing a market economy, and following the principles of democracy; six in education; five in health; four in food security and agriculture; and three in market, business sector and innovations.

In terms of the number of projects supported, the sectors are quite similar, with the biggest gap between renewable energy and water, where eight projects are supported, and market, business sector and innovations which has three.

However, it is difficult to predict trends given the low number of projects generally and the diverse categories, such as humanitarian aid and public private partnerships.

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<sup>10</sup> The Strategy also includes Central Asia as a new potential region for Slovak ODA. The complete list of Slovak ODA recipient countries is longer as the finance and interior ministries also have a list of recipient countries.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A PANACEA?

Economic development is undoubtedly an important part of each and every society.

Likewise, there is a growing emphasis on involving the private sector in development assistance so the SDGs can be met.

In autumn 2019 both the Act on Eximbanka (Slovak Export Import bank) and Act on Development Cooperation were amended, with the result that Eximbanka's activities were expanded to include the implementation of the European Union's financial instruments for development cooperation, and it is now allowed to directly finance and co-finance concessional credits.

Eximbanka will therefore become the first Slovak institution to use "blending," where part of the development project is irreversibly financed out of EU budget resources and part reversibly out of private or public sector resources. Before it can do this, it has to complete a pillar assessment in 2020.

Eximbanka's concessional loans scheme has come under ODA law since 2015, but thus far no project has been approved. This is partly because Eximbanka was unable to directly finance or co-finance projects. It could have done so through commercial banks but these did not always offer long-term payment schedules due to the higher risk associated with development projects or could provide insurance only, not loans. On top of that, the foreign banks which own Slovak banks are keener on supporting national companies in the country of origin rather than Slovak businesses. The new legislation allows Eximbanka to directly finance and co-finance projects. Furthermore the terms and conditions that were stricter on recipients than EU legislation were adjusted to favor potential credit receivers in developing countries.

Since September 2019 there have been several discussions between NGOs and Eximbanka, the Finance Ministry and Foreign Ministry. Not all the NGO suggestions were considered and there might still be a tendency to see this instrument in foreign trade terms rather than as development cooperation. Nevertheless, several layers of control mechanisms were adopted to safeguard the development aspect of such interventions. The first batch of projects is expected to show whether the standards and rules are adequate or not. A budget of €1 million is planned for 2019, €1 million for 2020 and €1.5 million for 2021.

The system of public private partnerships under SAIDC takes its inspiration from the model used in the Czech Republic. Small or "first phase" projects for feasibility studies or business plans can receive up to €10,000, and "second phase" implementation projects can receive up to €200,000.

The good news is that here the traditional idea that development cooperation should serve foreign trade purposes is slowly changing, and there are more social innovation projects of added value. Similarly, in 2018 businesses could respond to calls for development project proposals, NGOs were not eligible for public private partnership grants. This was corrected in 2019.

SAIDC supported 11 projects totaling €500,000. The public private partnerships program differs from the other SAIDC programs in that the list of recipient countries is much longer. They also have a simplified financial manual and feasibility studies are eligible which is not the case with needs assessment done by NGOs for example. The co-financing element is 20 per cent, which is significantly more achievable for the majority of businesses, unlike the 10 per cent co-financing element that applies

to not-for-profit entities. On the other hand, the system for refundation payments can cause cash flow problems for small and starting enterprises.

## MIGRATION

Large projects aimed at stemming migration to Europe and fostering security and border management have been playing an increasingly important role. The fact that development cooperation tends to be seen through the lenses of migration and security can be seen in the following figures.

In 2018 total bilateral assistance was €28 million and around €14 million of that was spent on “migration” projects. This mainly consisted of contributions to the EU Trust Fund for Africa, the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, humanitarian projects in Middle East and in-donor refugee costs.

Slovakia spends a lot on “migration” projects, indeed the major part of its bilateral aid goes on migration. Even the projects in Kenya focus on employment, vocational training and labor market access in an attempt to reduce migration from East Africa.

There is less focus on expertise and on the content of discussions on migration, including on what the role of Slovak ODA should be. This contrast is even greater when we take into account the way migration is often misused and misrepresented by politicians and the alternative media. Given how much funding Slovakia earmarked for “stemming migration” projects, not much has been done to counterbalance the disinformation and hoaxes (e.g. through a public awareness strategy and activities).

## MULTILATERAL AID: COMMITMENTS AND HOW MUCH CAN WE AFFORD TO OUTSOURCE?

In October 2018 the general secretary of the OECD, A. Gurría, officially presented prime minister P. Pellegrini with Slovakia's first OECD/DAC Peer Review report since the country became an OECD/DAC member in 2013. The report was then officially unveiled at the *Quo Vadis* conference on April 24, 2019.

In July minister M. Lajčák presented the ministry report on the results and recommendations of the OECD/DAC peer review<sup>11</sup>, informing the Slovak government of the progress and results of the peer review and Slovakia's fulfilment of its international OECD commitments. The Foreign Ministry confirmed that there was no plan to meet the objective of 0.33 per cent ODA/GNI by 2030 and that the structure of the ODA budget limits the ministry's scope as national coordinator to ensure that all Slovakia's development activities fall within the ODA (ODA-eligible) framework to raise the level of untied aid and to ensure ODA volumes grow fast enough.

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<sup>11</sup> “Správa o výsledkoch a odporúčaniach vyplývajúcich z partnerského hodnotenia Výboru OECD pre rozvojovú pomoc,” [Report on the results and recommendations of the OECD/DAC peer review] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2019. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Resolution/17812> (accessed on February 20, 2020).

The ministry rightly pointed out that the plan to ensure ODA reaches 0.33 per cent of GNI by 2030 would require an annual 13.8 per cent increase in ODA from 2019. It would mean an annual increase of approximately €20 million by 2022 and more in the coming years, if the estimates of faster GNI growth prove accurate.

The 2020 SAIDC budget was reduced and, unless multilateral aid is significantly increased, it is unrealistic to expect such a steady increase of almost 14 per cent.

The argument that one reasons Slovakia cannot increase its ODA budget is because of the low absorption capacity of Slovak implementers seems to have been rejected finally. In a consultation process with the ministry, other ministries confirmed their shared capacities can handle at least 10 per cent of the annual increase in ODA.

The sectoral and other priorities outlined and budgeted in the peer review on pages 14–16 (see the table below) do not fully reflect the long term strategy, aid effectiveness or Slovakia's international commitments.

Ministries	Priorities	Budget increase in € thousands		
		2020	2021	2022
Foreign Ministry	Private sector	1,000	1,000	1,000
	Migration	1,000	1,000	1,000
	Capacity building	650	650	650
Interior Ministry	material aid	150	150	200
Defense Ministry		20	22	24
Finance Ministry	Public and private finances	600	600	800
	Concessional loans Eximbanka	2,500	2,500	2,500
Health Ministry	Capacity building in crisis intervention	625	300	300
	Medical teams deployment	1,342	1,342	1,342
	Material aid	1,400	1,400	1,400
Environment Ministry	Global environmental fund	1,300	1,300	1,300
	Climate and adaptation fund	2,000		
	Biodiversity, climate change, water management	500	600	800
Transport and Construction Ministry		30	30	30
Education Ministry	Stipends	207.8	207.8	207.8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>13,325</b>	<b>11,102</b>	<b>11,554</b>

Ambrela, a development organization platform, issued a public statement<sup>12</sup> and open letter<sup>13</sup> to minister Miroslav Lajčák stressing these six main points:

<sup>12</sup> Several large Slovak newspapers published articles on this. See the example in *Sme*: "Mimovládky kritizujú správu ministerstva o rozvojovej pomoci," [NGOs criticize the MFA report on ODA] *Sme*, July 8, 2019. Available online: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22163275/mimovladky-kritizuju-spravu-ministerstva-o-rozvojovej-pomoci.html> (accessed on January 15, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> The public statement and open letter to the minister can be found on the Ambrela website: <https://ambrela.org/spravy/rozvojove-mimovladky-vlada-sr-oficialne-priznava-neplnenie-svojich-zavazkov-v-oblasti-rozvojovej-spoluprace%EF%BB%BF/> (accessed on January 15, 2020).



1. we consider the commitment to increase ODA to 0.22 per cent by 2030 to be insufficient in terms of Slovakia's international commitments.
2. ODA increases to Slovak entities are minimal and most (up to about 90 per cent) of all ODA is inaccessible to Slovak NGOs and businesses (in contrast to other OECD/DAC member ODA budgets).
3. The report indicates ODA has been further privatized and its purpose is misunderstood. ODA should not serve Slovak foreign trade purposes (there are other tools for this).
4. The security and defense budget should not cut into the ODA budget. This, however, is increasingly taking place, mainly through misuse of the issue of migration. Migration should be seen through the lens of development cooperation, rather than development cooperation being viewed through migration.
5. There were no consultations in the lead up to the report with the non-governmental sector, which is one of the Foreign Ministry's key partners. And, for example, two areas are unreasonably and significantly favored – health care and business involvement – at the expense of other areas.
6. The Framework Agreements are not even mentioned in the indicative budget for 2020–2022 although the new instrument requires a budget of approximately €1 million/year.

The Framework Agreements, now known as Strategic Partnerships, were ultimately adopted and budgeted for in the 2020 National Program. It is somehow symptomatic that three ministries asked for a larger budget than the Foreign Ministry did as national ODA coordinator.

However, at the end of the year everything had changed and the Foreign Ministry's total ODA budget was reduced even compared to its 2019 one, from €7,226,162 to €7,047,043.

There are three key aspects to bear in mind here. First, the total amount of ODA and Slovakia's commitment to reach 0.33 per cent ODA/GNI by 2030. Second, the ratio between the multilateral and bilateral aid, and third the prioritization of institutional capacity building within bilateral aid.

In 2018 total ODA amounted to €117.56 million. At 0.13 per cent of GNI Slovakia's ODA came last on the OECD DAC donor ranking. Concord Aidwatch placed Slovakia 22nd out of the 28 EU member states.<sup>14</sup>

Total ODA has almost doubled from €60 million to close to €120 million over the past ten years. One would think that if total ODA increased, bilateral ODA under the SAIDC would too. But that was not the case. The SAIDC allocation for all grants during the same period stagnated to around €4 million, and 2019 was no exception. This results in a situation where applicants can in practice apply for less than 5 per cent of total ODA.

Preliminary data shows the Foreign Ministry spent approximately €5.3 million on multilateral and bilateral assistance, including contributions to FRIT 1 and FRIT 2.

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<sup>14</sup> "Concord AIDWATCH 2019. Leaving no one behind: time for implementation," Concord, 2019, p. 65. Available online: [https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CONCORD\\_AidWatch\\_Report\\_2019\\_web.pdf](https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CONCORD_AidWatch_Report_2019_web.pdf) (accessed on January 20, 2020).

The preliminary figures from the Finance Ministry for 2019 reveal that multilateral aid of €56.07 million went to the EU, while €17.18 million went to the European Development Fund (EDF) and €2 million to the IBRD.

The bilateral component was €28 million (24 per cent) in 2018. The long term ratio of multilateral/bilateral aid is 80:20, and it has not changed, making it very difficult to introduce any systemic improvements and further capacity building of Slovak ODA and its actors, namely the Foreign Ministry (HQ) and embassies, SAIDC, Interior Ministry, NGOs, private sector and a few other stakeholders.

Again we face the question of boundaries and limits. How much ODA can and should Slovakia outsource while still being able not only to maintain but to grow its own system, capacities, expertise and so on? There is no doubt multilateralism is essential, particularly given the implications for international commitments and financial contributions to international organizations and programs. But Slovakia is outsourcing around 90 per cent of its ODA.

To put it simply, if we want to make our ODA system meaningful we need to alter the ratio. But do we want to? Do we have a vision for Slovak development cooperation, and what is its place in our foreign policy strategy?

The initial and easier step might be to consolidate the bilateral part, make it more focused and strategic with the underlying goal of building institutional capacities, such as the system of development diplomats or monitoring and evaluation unit, knowledge management, research and development.

## BILATERAL COOPERATION

Three major improvements occurred in 2019. First, in an open letter to minister Lajčák and at a meeting<sup>15</sup> on October 29, 2019, Ambrela made the key point that without increasing the bilateral component of the ODA budget – the one Slovak organizations (NGOs, companies, etc.) can apply for – the development cooperation system cannot be made more effective and nor can the necessary system changes be implemented. It was pointed out that the current Slovak ODA system has exacerbated the declining competitiveness of Slovak organizations applying for financial resources from the EU and other international organizations. It also reduces the visibility of the SlovakAid brand in the field and makes it more difficult to measure the effectiveness of aid. It divides resources into multiple geographic and sectoral priorities and shrinks jobs and expert capacities in both the Slovak system and in international organizations.

With the re-prioritizing in the planning of bilateral allocations, minister Lajčák was able to approve an increase of €1.5 million in the SAIDC budget for grants.

Second, and connected to the first, a new tool or modality that the NGOs had been advocating for many years – Framework Agreements or Strategic Partnerships

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<sup>15</sup> The report on the meeting and letter to the minister are available on the Ambrela website: “Ambrela na stretnutí s ministrom zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR,” [Ambrela at a meeting with the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic] Ambrela, October 30, 2019. Available online: <https://ambrela.org/spravy/ambrela-na-stretnuti-s-ministrom-zahranicnych-veci/> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

– was adopted and included in the 2020 National Program. These are to be piloted in education and employment in Kenya with a budget of €1 million over five years.

This new tool will make it easier to address the two leaving no one behind challenges listed in the OECD findings<sup>16</sup>:

- managing potentially higher costs and risks of reaching the furthest behind first and providing the long-term support required to achieve results;
- identifying and reaching the people/groups who are left behind, which requires better and more disaggregated data

The third piece of good news is that the SAIDC passed its pillar assessment, enabling it to obtain delegated authority and manage EU funds.

There have been no further changes to the balance of financial contributions versus projects in bilateral aid. Less than 30 per cent is implemented through Slovak contractors (NGOs, private companies, universities, research institutions) on a project basis.

Most of it consists of earmarked contributions to international organizations, funds and programs. In recent years the top two recipients have been FRIT (Facility for Refugees in Turkey) and EU Trust Funds (EU Trust Fund for Africa). While the former is more or less mandatory, the latter could create space to maneuver and for funding to be allocated more strategically, focusing on Slovak capacity building.

In total FRIT 1 (2016–2019) received €10.5 million. Slovakia contributed €1.2 million to FRIT 2 in 2019

Under EU joint programing in Kenya, Slovakia contributed €625,000 to AgriFi, a program aimed at raising productivity, adaptation and integration of small farmers into the labor market. Overall the SAIDC will contribute €2.5 million to the implementation of this program in 2018–2022.

In 2019 the SAIDC had a total budget of €7,226,162. A total of €4.3 million was allocated to grants. There were 13 calls for proposals for a total of €4.3 million. That is €300,000 per call. Of the 85 projects submitted 38 were approved (27 of 58 non-business projects and 11 of 27 business projects).

The SAIDC now publishes its indicative timeline of calls for proposals well in advance, which is another improvement.

## VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM

This sweetheart program of Slovak ODA is administratively less burdensome and financially less risky than other modalities. No significant changes were made to it.

In 2019 there were 58 volunteer applications for a total of €252,701, of which 24 were approved. Three years ago most of the applications were approved. This change

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<sup>16</sup> B. Di Francesco, I. McDonnell, "Leave no one behind: how are Development Assistance Committee members answering the pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? Findings from a survey of DAC members," *OECD development co-operation working paper 47*, November 2018, p. 8. Available online: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/eadd2f8d-en.pdf?expires=1585247109&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=8EB98BB2035D2D7F19ACF66B23325848> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

is partly due to the increase in average amount per volunteer, although the number of applications submitted has decreased annually. In 2018 civil society organizations submitted 74 applications for volunteer postings and SAIDC approved 32 of these. Thirty-one volunteers received financial support totaling €239,861. In 2017, 36 applications were approved. A total of €254,283.42 was approved for volunteers. In 2016, 31 out of 39 applications were approved, for a total of €226,602.18.

In 2019 applicants were given more time to submit their proposals and the minister was quicker at publishing the results than in 2018. Budget allocations for the monthly costs of volunteers and expert volunteers increased to €1,500 and €1,900 respectively, and coordination and administration costs increased from 5 per cent to 7 per cent.

Ambreila thinks the total number of volunteer projects received and number of approved applications needs to be significantly increased to ensure the long-term development of the ODA sector in Slovakia. At the same time, volunteers and experts could help develop future projects and analyze local needs and feasibility, as is the case in the modality for the preparatory phase of PPP projects.

The synergies between this program and others, such as humanitarian aid, could still be improved.

Diversity could prove a challenge to the program, especially given its limited funding. Below I outline three diversity components: goals, timeframe and countries. Practically each and every volunteer program differs to some extent, with goals such as labor mobility, improving job skills, shaping the values and life vision of young university students, building human resources in the sector, helping local communities or substituting/supplementing expat staff on projects. Needless to say, other key factors such as short (three months) and long (12 months) deployments and priority countries versus other countries come into play as well.

An idea that may be worth further exploring is the use of a framework agreement system under which implementers could be given a lump sum and the discretion to decide the number of volunteers, where they are sent and for how long. Such a system of flexibility might bring additional value.

## GLOBAL EDUCATION

The total allocation for development education was €50,000. One project was supported and one project was conditionally supported. Three projects were not approved.

The allocation for development education decreased significantly from €100,000 in 2018 to €50,000 in 2019. Five projects were approved last year for a total of €152,327.30.

At the moment, the funding, institutional capacity and strategic approach all seem to be stuck somewhere in between the Foreign Ministry and the Education Ministry.

## HUMANITARIAN AID

At the third conference on Syria in Brussels, the Commission and EU member states (including Slovakia) jointly pledged €6.75 billion for the years 2019–2020. The funds

are to address the ongoing humanitarian challenges in the regions that host Syrian refugees. It is mainly through its contributions to the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (€1.69 million in 2019) and SAIDC humanitarian projects that the Slovak Republic fulfils its commitments arising from the humanitarian summit in Istanbul in 2016 among other things.

Financial and material humanitarian aid was delivered to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Iran, Mozambique, Venezuela and Afghanistan and other countries. Financial humanitarian aid of €375,000 was implemented.

The material aid went to Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, Iran, Albania and Greece. In total the Slovak Republic provided assistance worth €623,547.00 with movable humanitarian material of more than 69,400.00 kg.

The territorial and sectoral focus of Slovakia's humanitarian system is rooted in the 2015 migration crises. Following two calls for proposals SAIDC allocated €1 million for the Middle East and South Sudan and €300,000 for Ukraine. Seven projects submitted by Slovak NGOs for €1.2 million were approved. But projects for a total of €1.7 million were not approved, showing that the absorption capacity is greater than the funding.

The SAIDC system provides support for post-humanitarian (reconstruction and rehabilitation phase) and complex protracted crises projects (deploying medical teams) rather than rapid onset and natural disaster projects. The main sectors are health and education.

In the second half of 2019 the 2016–2018 Slovak humanitarian system was assessed. The assessment was designed to generate input and recommendations for the creation of a humanitarian strategy in 2020.

## **POLICY COHERENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT: COAL, WEAPONS AND MIGRANTS**

“Countries are increasingly recognizing the need to break out of institutional and policy silos to fully realize the benefits of synergistic actions and effectively manage unavoidable trade-offs across SDGs.”<sup>17</sup>

At its meeting in December 2019, the Coordination Committee for Development Cooperation amended its statute to improve its coordination and coherence mechanisms as recommended in the DAC OECD peer review. The committee serves as a link between the national and international dimension of Agenda 2030. The following new members were welcomed onto the committee: the Transport Ministry, Health Ministry, Culture Ministry, DPMO and export-import bank (Eximbanka).

To improve its institutional effectiveness and flexibility, the committee adopted a policy that allows the meetings to be presided over by the head of section and to be convened more than once a year. Furthermore a model of cross ministerial work-

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<sup>17</sup> “Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development 2018: Towards sustainable and resilient societies,” OECD, May 28, 2018, p. 111. Available online: <http://www.oecd.org/about/sge/policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development-2018-9789264301061-en.htm> (accessed on January 20, 2020). In Slovakia the Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatization (DPMO) is responsible for PCSD at the national level. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs is responsible for the external dimension.

ing groups was agreed, and four thematic working groups were created for climate change, equal opportunities, implementation of DAC OECD recommendations and concessional loans (Eximbanka).

These changes can be seen as a good step forward if combined with a realistic agenda and staff capacities. To grasp the idea of coherence, the agenda could be structured according to the eight elements of the OECD's PCSD Framework.<sup>18</sup>

In the increasingly complex world, more coordination and policy coherence is required among different stakeholders, along with robust planning and quality data at hand, otherwise things can get complicated or off track.

The three examples below illustrate, rather than give clear answers, as to why it is important to start taking policy coherence more seriously in development and what can be at stake. They all belong to the category of negative spillover effects.<sup>19</sup>

The Slovak humanitarian projects in Ukraine help save the lives of civilians in Donbas and/or help them pursue dignified lives. The provision of shelter, access to basic medical health care and psychosocial support are but a few examples. However, Slovakia, Poland and other EU member states allowed in coal imports from Donbas which may have been used to help finance the conflict in the east of Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

Another example is Libya, a failed state that has not ratified the Convention on Refugees.

In 2018 Slovakia contributed €8 million to a project implemented by Italy on border management and capacity building of the local authorities in Libya.<sup>21</sup> There are several issues with this. First should the project be reported as ODA? Second, although the project may not be directly associated with human rights abuses, it could contribute to the hostile environment. The true nature of the search and rescue operations run by the Libyan coast guard in the Mediterranean is very dubious and human rights abuses may be being committed.<sup>22</sup> There is a case pending before the European Court of Hu-

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 82–4. Political commitment and leadership, policy integration, long-term planning horizons, analysis and assessments of potential policy effects, policy and institutional coordination, subnational and local involvement, stakeholder engagement, monitoring and reporting.

<sup>19</sup> The other two categories of the main objectives of PCSD are fostering synergies across different policy areas and identifying trade-offs and reconciling domestic and international policies.

<sup>20</sup> T. Forró, M. Potocki, K. Baca-Pogorzelska, "Odhalili, ako sa uhlie z Donbasu dostáva do EÚ a zarába na zbrane pre povstalcov," [They discovered how coal from Donbas enters the EU and generates money for weapons for insurgents] *DenníkN*, September 10, 2019. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/1578413/uhlie-a-krv-biznis-v-casoch-vojny-ako-donbas-zaraba-na-zbrane-a-majetok-svojich-vladcov-i-cast/> (accessed on January 20, 2020) and T. Forró, M. Potocki, K. Baca-Pogorzelska, "Uhlie z Donbasu s falošnými papiermi kupoval aj český a slovenský priemysel (II. časť reportáže)," [Coal from Donbas with false papers was bought by Slovak and Czech companies (part II)] *DenníkN*, September 19, 2019. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/1589515/uhlie-z-donbasu-s-falosnymi-papiermi-kupoval-aj-cesky-a-slovensky-priemysel-ii-cast-reportaze/> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> "Support to Integrated border and migration management in Libya – Second phase," EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, December 13, 2018. Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/north-africa/libya/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/north-africa/libya/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase_en) (accessed on January 20, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> C. Heller, L. Pezzani, I. Mann, V. Moreno-Lax and E. Weizman, "'It's an act of murder': how Europe outsources suffering as migrants drown," *The New York Times*, December 26, 2018. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/12/26/opinion/europe-migrant-crisis-mediterranean-libya.html> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

man Rights<sup>23</sup> and the ICC (International Criminal Court).<sup>24</sup> Third, refugees and migrants sent back to Libya face gross human rights violations in detention centers and many of these cases have been documented.<sup>25</sup>

Recently, on February 13, 2020, the Commissioner of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović, "called on Italy to acknowledge the realities currently prevailing on the ground in Libya and to suspend cooperation activities with the Libyan Coast Guard that result in the return of persons intercepted at sea to Libya."<sup>26</sup>

Another story comes from Azerbaijan. Investigative journalists from [www.investigace.cz](http://www.investigace.cz)<sup>27</sup> and others published a series of articles in 2019 documenting the export of weapons and military systems from Slovakia and the Czech Republic through Israel to Azerbaijan, where the UN, EU and OSCE recommend weapons should not be exported because of the latent conflict in Upper Karabakh.

## MINOTAUR'S LABYRINTH: STILL FINDING THE WAY OUT

### INTERCONNECTEDNESS

In 2019 many strategies came into force or were created. Many other tasks are still in the queue, like the strategies for policy coherence in development, multilateral devel-

<sup>23</sup> The case relates to the interception and rescue of a migrant dinghy in distress in the Mediterranean Sea, carrying a group of around 150 persons, including the 17 applicants, who had left Libya, and the alleged human rights violations resulting from this operation. Third party intervention by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights see: "Third party intervention by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights under Article 36, paragraph 3, of the European Convention on Human Rights Application No. 21660/18S.S. and others v. Italy," CommDH(2019)29, Strasbourg, November 15, 2019. Available online: <https://rm.coe.int/third-party-intervention-before-the-european-court-of-human-rights-app/168098dd4d> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> "Communication to the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court Pursuant to the Article 15 of the Rome Statute." Available online: <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2019/jun/eu-icc-case-EU-Migration-Policies.pdf> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> S. Hayden, "The U.N. is leaving migrants to die in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, October 10, 2019. Available online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/10/libya-migrants-un-iom-refugees-die-detention-center-civil-war/> (accessed on October 10, 2019) and "No escape from hell. EU Policies Contribute to Abuse of Migrants in Libya," Human Rights Watch, January 21, 2019. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/01/21/no-escape-hell/eu-policies-contribute-abuse-migrants-libya> (accessed on January 20, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> "Commissioner urges Italy to suspend co-operation activities with Libyan Coast Guard and introduce human rights safeguards in future migration co-operation," Council of Europe, February 21, 2020. Available online: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-urges-italy-to-suspend-co-operation-activities-with-libyan-coast-guard-and-introduce-human-rights-safeguards-in-future-migration-co-opera> (accessed on February 25, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> "České zbraně v Ázerbájdžánu I: Jak se z podvozku stalo dělo," *investigace.cz*, September 17, 2019. Available online: <https://www.investigace.cz/ceske-zbrane-v-azerbajdzanu-i-jak-se-z-podvozku-stalo-delo/> (accessed on January 20, 2020); "České zbraně v Ázerbájdžánu II: Ministerská mlha," *investigace.cz*, September 18, 2019. Available online: <https://www.investigace.cz/ceske-zbrane-v-azerbajdzanu-ii-ministerska-mlha/> (accessed on January 20, 2020)

opment cooperation and humanitarian aid. Country Strategy Papers for Moldova and Georgia are to be drafted as well.

Despite the number of strategic documents it might prove difficult to come up with a unifying vision. What is the relation between development cooperation and the pivotal Foreign Ministry document – its *non-existent strategy* on Slovak foreign policy? What do we want to achieve and what should we base our decisions on?

For instance, the OECD/ DAC report stated that, given Slovakia's ODA limited capacity, aid should be more sector and geographically focused and results-based. Evidence-based decisions are crucial if we are to move a step forward in this matter. For that to happen requires more analytical annual reports on Slovak ODA and other topics but also the staff to interpret the data and trends and able to work with models and scenarios. Assessments are still rarely undertaken and a proper system of monitoring and evaluation ought to be put in place. The Foreign Ministry has committed itself to assessing the effectiveness of cooperation with its program countries in 2020. Delegating or more decision-making sharing between officials, politicians and experts at all institutional stages might be another factor worth considering.

### **ARE WE ON THE GROUND?**

Two other data sources that should be tapped are firstly the development diplomats and secondly the SlovakAid implementers and third parties.

The first step in improving the system of ODA diplomacy might be to open up the selection process to the general public and strive to get the very best on board – experienced personnel with development cooperation background. It is not clear what exactly the job description is and to what extent it differs from the reality or how much of the non-related ODA agenda is placed on the shoulders of development diplomats. Development diplomats should have a say in the decision-making. It remains unclear what the system of appraisals and results-based management is. Proactive communication with the EU delegations, networking and linking Slovak implementers with potential new partners must be among the cornerstones of the job profile. The rotational system for this category of staff could be more sensitive to ODA needs.

Another essential question is where the development diplomats should be deployed. Slovakia contributed heavily to the Syrian crisis response, a number of Slovak NGOs operate in the field, and the embassy in Beirut has Syria, Iraq and Jordan in its portfolio. Another mega crisis is lurking around the corner in Yemen. Yet, when it comes development diplomats, other countries have been prioritized over Lebanon.

*Intermezzo:*

*Well I guess you would say something like: "but we need money for all this."  
And you are right. The foreign ministry openly admits that "the mobilization of public and private sources of development finance remains a long-term task."<sup>28</sup>*

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<sup>28</sup> "Hodnotenie priorít zahraničnej a európskej politiky Slovenskej republiky v roku 2019 a ich zameralenie na rok 2020," op. cit., p. 28



*But the trick is here. If we cannot increase the total ODA budget perhaps because of a severe economic crisis, we can certainly redistribute the highly disproportionate allocation of bilateral and multilateral aid, and instead of sending multiple voluntary financial contributions to international organizations, redirect them into the building up the Slovak ODA system, including all its partners and institutions. For this we need the vision and the will.*

### **GOOD THINGS WE CAN BUILD UPON**

There are several positives in all this. The adoption of the strategic partnership modality could open up new horizons and provide capacities for all ODA stakeholders to move away from the surface and dig deeper, beyond the general geography and nation state level, and to start thinking more about particular regions, communities, minorities, local peculiarities, specific challenges and tailor made solutions. Its main value should lie not in quantity – in prolonging projects or increasing the budget – but in a different philosophy. In other words, the strategic partnership could include – alongside its core elements – knowledge management and capacity building and provide the space to test innovative solutions and develop prototypes.

This should prevail over any attempt to spend the large budget on infrastructural and construction works. Certainly, many practical questions need to be addressed along the road, such as how to secure the funding in the long run and should it be for Kenya only or rotate annually among other countries.

The best outcomes of the strategic partnerships in the form of a prototype can be scaled up in partnership with a larger national or international donor and within the EU Joint Programing.

Likewise, the delegated authority of the SAIDC to manage EU funds could bring about new partnerships and learning opportunities for the Slovak sector.

We need to step out of our comfort zone, be more confident and try new things. In 2019 we saw that it was possible to make changes.