

Slovak development cooperation in 2020

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■ Prologue: you can't change the direction of the wind, but you can adjust the sails

The crisis is one thing and our response to it is another. Yet, the two things have been and will continue to be treated as interchangeable, whether intentionally or not. The global pandemic has also revealed the extent of inclusiveness and solidarity, both in relation to society and the individual.¹

There's no doubt that in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic has been the main game changer in development cooperation worldwide and in Slovakia. The two main questions haunting and puzzling the minds of foreign ministry officials, non-governmental organizations and others were:

- How should we respond and provide development and humanitarian assistance in this global crisis?
- How can we protect or adapt, perhaps even transform, the Slovak system of development cooperation when faced with the coronavirus.

The two are interconnected and of course the potential solutions are to be found at the crossover point, which is unknown territory. They also highlight

¹ "Covid-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver health care for all, the fiction that unpaid care work is not work, the delusion that we live in a post-racist world; the myth that we are all in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris," said the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in "Opening remarks at Nelson Mandela Lecture: 'Tackling the inequality pandemic: a new social contract for a new era,'" United Nations Secretary-General, July 18, 2020. Available online: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-07-18/remarks-nelson-mandela-lecture-tackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era> (accessed on February 20, 2021).

another fundamental issue: did the decision makers adopt a systemic approach and adjust development cooperation to reflect the pandemic situation, or has it deepened and accelerated previously existing trends and exacerbated fundamental problems that were already in evidence? In other words what was improved (including system changes), what damage control was enacted and what deteriorated?

■ Three key factors

In order to better understand Slovak development cooperation in 2020 we need to think about three factors:

- the global coronavirus pandemic;
- the state of ODA before 2020; and
- the new government manifesto.

Paradoxically, the global pandemic, perhaps even more than previous crises such as the financial crisis of 2008 and the so called migration crisis of 2015, highlights the importance of development cooperation. Slovakia may well be faced with another pandemic in the future, and today we know that simply closing borders does not necessarily help.

The coronavirus has significantly affected the health, economic security and way of life of the entire population of Slovakia. However, it has also been an opportunity to show greater solidarity and to change mindsets, which will ultimately lead to more rapid and substantial change in the system of development cooperation.

The pandemic will probably significantly deepen inequality in the world, slow down the achievement of the sustainable development goals and place millions of people in a very difficult situation.

In a report entitled *The inequality virus*,² Oxfam stated that the 1,000 richest people on the planet had recouped their losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic within nine months, but that it could take more than a decade for

² "The inequality virus bringing together a world torn apart by coronavirus through a fair, just and sustainable economy," Oxfam, January 25, 2021. Available online: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-virus> (accessed on January 26, 2021).

the world's poorest to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic. According to the report the Covid-19 pandemic is the first time in history that inequality is rising in almost every country at once. This does not just affect wealth; gender and racial inequality are expected to increase as well.

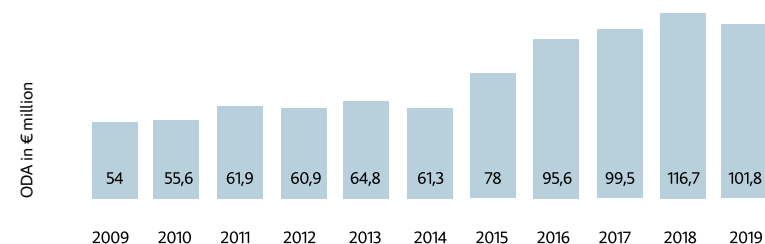
The report also says that 112 million fewer women would be at high risk of losing their incomes or jobs if women and men were equally represented in the sectors negatively affected by the Covid-19 crisis.

The pandemic does not just present a challenge to development cooperation and the search for solutions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, whether in resource mobilization, speed of response, transparency or international cooperation system, but could also significantly change the whole development cooperation system, and have impacts that are not yet visible or still have to be evaluated.

Second, in order to better understand development in 2020 it is worth reminding ourselves what it looked like on the eve of 2020. Even before 2020, EU official development assistance (ODA) was in decline. In 2019, despite a slight increase of €3 billion, ODA had fallen for the third year in a row relative to the EU's gross national income (GNI) (accounting for 0.46 per cent of GNI).

The Slovak development cooperation budget had fallen to 0.11 per cent of GNI (€101 million) before the Covid-19 pandemic, and that was despite GDP growth. Unfortunately, this is a long-term trend. Without going into the motivations, it is the case that the Slovak Republic had decided to contribute even less of its total wealth to help less developed countries than in the previous year.

Figure 1. Total Slovak ODA 2009–2019 (in € m)

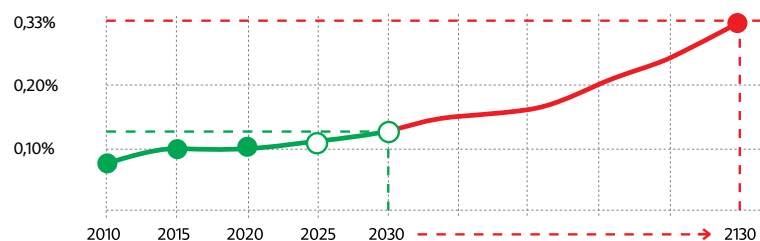


Source: "Aidwatch 2020," Ambrela – Platform for development organisations, 2021. Available online: https://ambrela.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ambrela_Aidwatch_2020_WEB.pdf (accessed on January 25, 2021).

One can therefore legitimately ask how important it is for the Slovak Republic to help solve problems that, being global in nature, are increasingly affecting Slovakia's interests and the lives of its inhabitants.

If the development cooperation budget continues to increase at the same rate, we will not achieve our international commitment of 0.33 per cent of GNI by 2030, but by 2130.

Figure 2. Timeline of Slovakia's ODA commitment of 0.33% of GNI



Source: "Aidwatch 2020," op. cit.

But there were bold and realistic plans for 2020 and improvements were incorporated into strategic documents and budgets. The significant increase in funding and the advancement of activities in January and February 2020 were grounds for enthusiasm.

It is important to note that the increase in funding was down to unique circumstances that will not apply in the next few years, namely:

- accumulation of unspent funds from previous years and willingness to use them wisely (financial contributions for 2020 were prepaid and hence the almost €1 million increase for SAIDC grants);
- the overall SAIDC budget was funded purely out of microgrants;
- the Covid-19 pandemic had not begun.

Nevertheless, the development community rightly expected 2020 to be the best year out of the last 10 years at least. The optimism was backed by activities that had been planned and properly budgeted. To name a few: the Foreign Ministry planned to deploy three new development diplomats to Lebanon, Ethiopia and Serbia; the budget for grants of SAIDC was increased by

€1.5 million (more than 20 per cent); and a new tool framework partnership agreement renamed a strategic partnership was to be piloted in Kenya. The most important tasks included the drafting of the country strategy papers for Kenya, Moldova and Georgia, and also the "Strategy on humanitarian aid" and the systematic implementation of project and program evaluations.³

Third, following the February elections a new government was formed on March 21st, and Ivan Korčok became the new Foreign Minister (April 8th). Development cooperation became the responsibility of the new state secretary, Ingrid Brocková.

The Government's Program Manifesto⁴ raised further expectations, especially when compared to the 2016. It included a short chapter on development cooperation with rather bold commitments such as

- to promote the targeted setting of development cooperation and humanitarian aid instruments;
- to accelerate the increase in financial resources for bilateral development cooperation activities in line with our commitments to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD);
- to continue a close dialogue with the non-governmental sector as a key partner;
- to seek to mobilize private sector resources through engagement with major donors and international organizations, in particular the EU.

Besides this the manifesto also included commitments on strategic communication, awareness raising and tackling the threat of disinformation and fake news (among other things) in development cooperation, humanitarian aid and support to human rights worldwide.

³ "Zameranie bilaterálnej rozvojovej spolupráce SR na rok 2020," [Bilateral development cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2020] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2020. Available online: https://slovakaid.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/zameranie_bilaterálnej_rozvojovej_spoluprace_sr_na_rok_2020.pdf (accessed on January 26, 2021).

⁴ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky," [Program Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic] Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2020. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/24756/1> (accessed on February 21, 2021).

One of the strongest commitments states that “the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the promotion of the rule of law will be a key criterion in the promotion of the foreign policy interests of the Slovak Republic.”

■ SlovakAid in 2020 or seven lean cows

Total ODA for 2020 amounted to €122 million and increased from 0.11 per cent to 0.14 per cent of GNI. Bilateral aid was €32 million and multilateral €90 million. These figures may look promising but 50 per cent of the bilateral aid consists of €16 million of debt relief for Serbia. In multilateral aid the contributions to the European Commission increased by €7 million.

Table 1. Development cooperation spending: plans vs. reality (€ m)

	■ national program for 2020	■ real spending in grants	
Grants	Development cooperation projects	€ 3,000,000	2,464,190
	Strategic partnerships	600,000 ⁵	0
	Humanitarian aid projects	1,300,000	1,737,509
	GCE projects	100,000	89,593
	Capacity building	150,000	150,000
	Volunteers	351,860	185,760
	EU Co-financing projects	80,000	15,792
■ Grants total	5,581,000	4,642,844	
Financial contributions	Microgrants	600,000	633,849
	Sharing Slovak Expertise	110,000	11,733
	Unplanned	0	875,160
Other	SAIDC admin	575,183	664,695
	Evaluations	50,000	0
	Audit	50,000	58,860
	Capacity building	10,000	6,302
	Public awareness	70,000	69,150
	Development diplomats	0	234,129

⁵ The plan was for a five-year strategic partnership project to consist of a first three-year tranche of € 600,000 and a second tranche of € 400,000 in years four and five.

The year started positively and the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC) successfully completed its year-long EU pillar assessment⁶ to become the third EU13 national agency to administer EU funds. This will not only improve the quality but also bring additional funding back to the national level, in a situation where 80 per cent of the total Slovak ODA is multilateral with the biggest recipient being the EU. In January the Slovak National Program⁷ including the budget for 2020 was approved by the government and it seems there were no major obstacles to starting implementation of the promising plan mentioned above.

Main developments in SAIDC funding:

- *systemic elements* and changes planned to improve the quality of Slovak ODA, such as strategic partnerships and evaluations, were canceled;
- the *predictability* of SlovakAid donor deteriorated because the two program countries Kenya and Georgia had funds approved of only 48 per cent of what had been allocated under calls for proposals;
- funding – financial contributions – that are *not accessible to Slovak implementers* and not under the direct effective control of the Foreign Ministry were increased by more than 100 per cent;
- moreover 17 per cent of the grant funding, i.e. €900,000 was *redirected* to financial contributions;
- grant funding returned to its *€4–4.5 million, ten-year average*;
- at the same time the *success rate dramatically declined and demand almost doubled*, In 2020 a total of 16 calls were announced, 37 out of the 109 applications were successful (27 projects submitted by NGOs and ten entrepreneurs and other entities), representing a success rate of 34 per cent (excluding volunteer projects), In 2018, out of the 59 applications submitted, 30 were successful, which is a success rate of 50 per cent (excluding volunteer projects);
- in response to the pandemic SAIDC quickly prepared *methodological guidelines for the ongoing projects* (shifting and changing implementation of activities, eligibility of unexpected items/higher amounts etc.) but it was not able to tackle the political motives behind the main changes stated above.

All the above did much to erase the high expectations not only of 2020 but beyond.

⁶ “Zameranie bilaterálnej rozvojovej spolupráce SR na rok 2020,” op. cit.

⁷ Ibid

■ Development projects

In the call for Kenya with an allocation of €500,000, only €170,000 was used on a single approved project, while the other five projects submitted by Slovak NGOs with a long-term presence in Kenya were not recommended by the evaluation committee for approval despite having achieved the minimum threshold, or more than 75 points. The real reason for not recommending and not approving five projects was not the quality, but the ministry's need to redirect most of the allocation to Covid-19 related activities.⁸ In the future a more transparent manner should be adopted and decisions to redirect resources and the justification for that must be communicated publicly and in a timely manner so applicants do not waste money on unnecessary work and project preparation costs.

NGOs need to plan longer ahead strategically. To what extent should they take into account the diminishing interest of the ministry in relation to CSO projects in Kenya? The fact that the call for strategic partnerships, advocated for by the CSOs in the past eight years, was canceled just a day before the submission deadline meant economic and reputation losses for the NGOs and their local partners working on the project proposals.

The regional approach in Subsaharan Africa was kept and two projects were approved in Tanzania and Ethiopia and one joint proposal for Uganda and Rwanda. The Eastern Partnership call was changed, applying to individual countries. Despite the fact that Georgia is a program country, only €300,000 of the €500,000 allocated and only three of the ten projects were approved. For Ukraine the call issued was for humanitarian projects, not development projects. As regards the Western Balkans only €176,624 was redistributed and two projects were approved. In 2019, four applications were approved totaling €343,371.05. In 2018, five projects were approved overall to a total of €430,287.40.

⁸ Presented at the meeting between the foreign ministry and civil society organizations on June 24, 2020.

■ Humanitarian aid

On the positive side it has to be said that the humanitarian call was processed and evaluated in ten days (in the past the process has taken 60–90 days), Although it was ad-hoc, it was tested and the foreign ministry should build upon this experience when designing rapid response humanitarian calls. However, two things shaped the Slovak humanitarian calls: low predictability and geopolitics.

All in all four humanitarian calls were published totaling €1.7 million. The problem was that with the limited funding they targeted four regions, the Middle East, South Sudan and Ethiopia, Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic the focus of Slovak ODA was on South Sudan and the Middle East.

The two Covid-19 calls included socio-economic assistance and were open to the business sector as well. The Covid-19 humanitarian calls were not primarily targeted at countries where SlovakAid provides humanitarian aid on a long-term basis and none of the applications were approved for these countries. This represents a departure from the Medium-Term Strategy and diluted the scarce resources among a larger number of countries and sectors.

As one CSO senior program manager bluntly stated in relation to the predictability, planning and sustainability of the Slovak humanitarian interventions:

Everything – expertise, project impact, quality networking, good reputation, trained local experts who have been in the project for years and worked with beneficiaries, their know-how – has been lost, and hence the ability to react promptly to an alarming situation is reduced. Organizations generally build a strong base, are members of the Cluster system, get to know other organizations, and deepen relationships – thereby gaining potential new donors. Short-term projects also reduce such networking at the local level, as well as the overall visibility of SlovakAid in the eyes of other donors.⁹

This statement illustrates the need to have and to stick to a humanitarian aid strategy.

⁹ Feedback given as part of the assessment of SAIDC grant calls by Ambrela and its members.

■ Volunteer program

Needless to say due to the very nature of this program it was one of the most affected and only 18 of 58 volunteer projects were approved, that is 50 per cent, or €185,760, of the total allocation used. Despite the fact that Kenya is a program country, only two of the 15 applications for Kenya were approved (even taking into account the fact that the volunteer program does not just serve project and program countries, it is disproportionate). The other two program countries were so interested that no volunteer project was submitted for Georgia and only two projects for Moldova. It is not entirely clear whether and what the synergetic effect of volunteering projects should be in relation to program countries. SAIDC does not disclose how many points the applicant has achieved. In some cases, the letter does not mention the evaluation criteria at all, despite the fact that they are part of the call. It is not clear from the evaluation what the role and position the embassy has in the evaluation commission.¹⁰

The NGOs represented by Ambrela suggested introducing block grants for volunteer projects, NGOs know best which volunteer projects are a priority for them, which volunteers they have selected, and what will enable the selection of countries, etc. Block grants could streamline and speed up processes while relieving the SAIDC administration. It should be stated that the Foreign Ministry and SAIDC successfully repatriated all volunteers and planned volunteer deployments were canceled.

¹⁰ The two recurring reasons are not sufficient nor logical: A. "The request did not get sufficient points..." is a circular argument. It does not answer the basic question of why the project did not obtain enough points. In addition, the applicant does not even know how many points they get; B. "The embassy did not recommend the application to the evaluation committee for approval." The embassy has only one vote on the whole commission, and no right of veto, and if the project is not recommended, it does not mean that the other members of the commission have to follow it. In addition, there is no justification given as to why the project was not recommended.

■ Global education

SAIDC approved projects focused on public information rather than on education. The demand for grants exceeded the allocation 3.5 times over. The pandemic has also shown the very practical implications of a nexus between global education and infodemia.

Ambrela raised the possibility of increasing the budget with the help of DEVCO/DEAR in the context of SAIDC as a pillar assessed national agency. SAIDC responded fairly positively and it may well become a key goal in the systemic funding of global education.

■ Microgrants

In 2020 a total of 76 microgrants were implemented totaling €633,849.68 in the following countries: Kenya (13), Bosnia and Herzegovina (10), North Macedonia (5), Georgia (9), Serbia/Kosovo (5), Ukraine (8), Iraq (1), Montenegro (2), Bhutan (1), Belarus (1), Moldova (9), Lebanon (3), Ethiopia (3), Albania (4), Greece (1) and Indonesia (1).

It is not clear what the proportion of microgrants is in relation to program countries, humanitarian aid priority countries and support for human rights, democracy and civil society. More than one third was approved for the Western Balkans and in Kenya the vast majority of recipients were state authorities.

The author of this article suggests the current microgrant guidelines for program countries should be revised so the microgrants contribute to Slovakia's strategic and sectoral goals. They could have a complementarity function and contribute to large interventions or could be used as seed money or to support humanitarian responses.

Table 2. SlovakAid calls in 2020

■ call specification	■ allocation according to national program	■ allocations per call	■ spending	■ underspent
SAMRS/2020/ZB/1	400,000.00	400,000.00	176,624.00	223,376.00
SAMRS/2020/HUM/1	1,000,000.00	1,000,000.00	1,049,459.45	-49,459.45
SAMRS/2020/KE/1	500,000.00	500,000.00	172,172.00	327,828.00
SAMRS/2020/GE/1	500,000.00	500,000.00	311,314.00	188,686.00
SAMRS/2020/MD/1	500,000.00	500,000.00	598,897.00	-98,897.00
SAMRS/2020/ST/KE/1	600,000.00	0.00 ¹¹	0.00	0.00
SAMRS/2020/D/1	351,860.00	351,860.00	185,760.00	166,100.00
SAMRS/2020/SSA/1	500,000.00	500,000.00	649,725.00	-149,725.00
SAMRS/2020/AFG/1	100,000.00	100,000.00	99,960.00	40.00
SAMRS/2020/PPP/1	500,000.00	500,000.00	455,498.00	44,502.00
SAMRS/2020-UA/1	300,000.00	300,000.00	190,000.00	110,000.00
SAMRS/2020/RV/1	100,000.00	100,000.00	89,593.00	10,407.00
SAMRS/2020/EK/1	80,000.00	80,000.00	15,792.16	64,207.84
SAMRS/2020/HUM/2		300,000.00	298,050.14	1,949.86
SAMRS/2020/HUM/3		300,000.00	200,000	100,000.00
SAMRS/2020/BK/1	150,000.00	150,000.00	150,000	0.00
■ total	5,581,860.00	5,581,860.00	4,642,844.75	939,015.25

■ Multilateral aid and other development

The first news about Covid-19 on the Foreign Ministry website appeared on February 3, 2020. It briefly noted the spread of the coronavirus in China. On February 5th the Slovak government approved a financial humanitarian contribution of €200,000 to the WHO for the fight against the coronavirus.¹²

¹¹ This call was canceled the day before the submission deadline and the funding was redirected to other calls.

¹² "Slovakia's contribution to the World Health Organisation's fight against the coronavirus," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, February 18, 2020. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/current_issues/-/asset_publisher/lrJ2tDuQdEKp/content/prispevok-slovenska-na-boj-s-koronavirusom-svetovej-zdravotnickej-organizacii/10182?p_auth=rwJ4zbwJ (accessed on January 30, 2021).

Slovakia was leader of the Slavkov Format (cooperation with the Czech Republic and Austria) at the time and announced at the Slavkov meeting in Bratislava on February 12th the launch of the joint development project in Aragvi, Georgia. At the conference on Foreign and European policy of the Slovak Republic 2016–2020 on February 13th, Miroslav Lajčák gave his farewell speech after almost ten years as the minister, stating the following:

We are on the threshold of processes that can be described as the gradual transformation of the world order, in which rivalry between the great powers is being renewed and the existing rules are increasingly being ignored or violated. However, what has happened in recent years is merely the manifestation of something deeper.

These processes caused shocks that were felt in all corners of the world – and the result is something that can unquestionably be called the transformation of the global order. We are in the midst of an ongoing story so it is difficult to define its parameters. We don't know how nor when it will end... We don't know what human and material values it will require, but we know it's happening, that we are in the midst of tectonic shifts in geopolitics and geoeconomics, and we sense that it will be extremely difficult to navigate these movements. [translated by author]

With a little exaggeration, we can now say it was a prophetic speech.

His brief comments on development cooperation were partly based on an optimistic vision of the future rather than on the great results of the past. "We have succeeded in professionalizing development cooperation, which today has not only a clear strategy, but also recognition by the OECD and, most recently, a quality management system certificate. It will allow us to participate in joint EU projects."¹³

¹³ "Miroslav Lajčák: do not break the strategic compass of Slovakia," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, February 13, 2020. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/detail/-/asset_publisher/oLViwP07vPxx/content/m-lajcak-nerozbite-strategicky-kompas-slovenska/10182?p_auth=2ltRP9TJ&_101_INSTANCE_oLViwP07vPxx_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fen%2Fhome (accessed on January 30, 2021).

At the EU Foreign Affairs Council on February 17th, Minister Lajčák signed an MoU between the foreign ministry and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED).¹⁴ As the ministry put it, the aim of the document was to lay the foundations for cooperation in exchanging information and sharing experience on development aid with the EED, which focuses on supporting civil society in the EU's neighborhood.

On April 21, 2020, at the meeting with CSO representatives, State Secretary Ingrid Brocková declared that development cooperation is or at least should be one of the core businesses of the Foreign Ministry. The two parties at the meeting discussed the economic impact on the sector, the recently announced humanitarian call, as well as the possibility of announcing further calls. For Ambrela it was a good opportunity to provide additional information on the adaptability of projects submitted as part of the SAIDC calls in light of the pandemic. This was the first time CSO representatives had asked for the matching requirement to be temporarily lifted.

On May 12, 2020, the state secretary participated in an online discussion on European solidarity (among other things) during the pandemic, where she stated:

It is essential to show solidarity within and outside the EU, towards our partners in Africa, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. The whole EU is built on the principle of solidarity and the Slovak Republic wants to be part of the system of help and solidarity.

Later, on May 13th, she confirmed Slovakia's position at the first meeting with Jutta Urpilainen, the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships.

¹⁴ "Minister Lajčák at the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, February 17, 2020, Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/ministry/minister/activities/-/asset_publisher/nNnVuDsSsgB1/content/minister-m-lajcak-na-zasadnuti-rady-pre-zahranicne-veci-eu/10182 (accessed on January 30, 2021).

■ Slovak contribution to Team Europe

The ministry redirected €10 million for developing countries to fight the coronavirus. The bulk of it, €5 million, is to be transferred from the Integrated Border and Migration Management Phase II project to a new project to help Libya fight Covid-19. Around €3.5 million was to go on SlovakAid projects adjusted for Covid-19. This is not new money and, needless to say, it will be missed elsewhere.

■ Humanitarian aid to Beirut as a wake-up call?

Apart from being hit by the Covid-19 pandemic Lebanon is not only hosting one of the largest refugee populations per capita but has also recently been struggling with a massive economic crisis that has pushed many Lebanese people into poverty and society into turbulent political unrest.

The explosion in Beirut port on August 4, 2020

has left at least 220 dead, 6,500 injured and 300,000 displaced from their homes. The explosion was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded, registering as a 3.5 magnitude earthquake in Beirut and felt as far away as Cyprus – more than 100 miles away. According to the World Bank, the blast caused between \$3.8 billion and \$4.5 billion in damages. The health sector was amongst the most damaged, with 292 facilities damaged – 36 per cent of health facilities in the region.¹⁵

The Slovak Foreign Ministry was quick to offer solidarity, both out of sympathy and for strategic reasons given the fact that Lebanon is a SlovakAid partner country. Nevertheless the practical side of the Slovak humanitarian system proved outdated and demonstrated a lack of speed in action, a weak inter-ministerial coordination mechanism and the non-existence of certifi-

¹⁵ "Beirut explosion situation report #9," UN OCHA, February 10, 2021. Available online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/beirut-explosion-situation-report-9-february-10-2021> (accessed February 28, 2021).

cated rescue modules, among other major deficiencies. Slovakia contributed €100,000 to the UNOCHA and delivered four tons of food and medical materiel in cooperation with the three Slovak NGOs active in Lebanon.¹⁶ The systemic difficulties have prompted a discussion on the need to revise the Slovak mechanism of humanitarian aid and the need for a humanitarian aid strategy as well.

As a coordinator of humanitarian aid the Foreign Ministry rightly initiated the inter-ministerial dialogue on how to improve the Slovak system and in November the first stakeholder meeting involving civil society representatives took place. Around the same time Ambrela delivered its participatory review of the Slovak system of humanitarian aid. The process is to continue in 2021.

■ Reflections on the implementation of the Government Program Manifesto

On September 24, 2020, Minister Korčok unveiled the Foreign and European Policy of the Slovak Republic in 2020 in his speech in parliament.¹⁷

It should be noted at the outset that from the start the new leadership of the ministry has placed a clear emphasis on democracy and human rights, including expressing support for civil society in Belarus and elsewhere, and this is to be welcomed.

¹⁶ "In reaction to tragic events in Beirut, Slovakia provides humanitarian aid to Lebanon," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, August 11, 2020. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/current_issues/-/asset_publisher/lrJ2tDuQdEKp/content/slovensko-poskytuje-v-reakcii-na-tragicke-udalosti-v-bejrute-libanonu-humanitar-nu-pomoc/10182?_101_INSTANCE_lrJ2tDuQdEKp_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fen%2Fnews%2Frok%3D2020%26mesiac%3D7 (accessed on February 27, 2021).

¹⁷ "Minister Korčok: the more we are united at home, the more successful we will be abroad," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, September 24, 2020. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/current_issues/-/asset_publisher/lrJ2tDuQdEKp/content/minister-i-korcok-cim-sme-jednotnejsi-doma-tym-uspesnejsi-budeme-v-zahranici/10182?_101_INSTANCE_lrJ2tDuQdEKp_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fen%2Fnews%2Fcurrent_issues (accessed January 30, 2021).

The new foreign and European policy contains a clear reference to Slovakia's pro-Western orientation: "We are part of the Western democratic community and let me emphasize again: the way we want to manage our society." What worries me, though, is that the section on development cooperation was not consulted with civil society, despite the Government Program Manifesto saying that the Slovak government will continue a close dialogue with the CSO sector as a key partner:

The Government of the Slovak Republic will support active citizenship and simplify the procedures for public participation in the administration of public affairs, including participation in the creation, implementation and control of public policies, including legislation. In this context, the government will adopt regulations and public policies concerning the non-governmental sector in close dialogue with it. [translated by author]

The foreign and European policy document does not mention civil society, with the exception of

...the ongoing task is to raise public awareness of the importance of development cooperation and the visibility of SlovakAid activities at home and abroad. In this effort, the Ministry will be assisted by a long-term partnership with the civic sector,

which I consider to be insufficient.

On the other hand, it contains the clearly unrealistic goal of "fulfilling the international commitment to achieve a 0.33 per cent share of official development assistance in gross national income by 2030," while the ministry has no concrete realistic plan of how to achieve at least 0.22 per cent. In the past 10 years it was about 0.11 per cent annually (0.11 per cent in 2019). The absence of the above makes planning difficult and increases the frustration of all, including state actors in development cooperation.

The document goes on to say that "...in this context, in addition to the annual increase in budgetary resources allocated to development cooperation and humanitarian aid, we will also emphasize the mobilization of private resources and greater involvement of the private sector in development cooperation." There is no strategy for involving the private sector in development cooperation, nor is there a basic prediction or modelling of how much private funding could flow into development cooperation from the state budget thanks to the support of the private sector. Development cooperation does not equal foreign trade. Unlike in other areas, this document does not make reference to any specific tasks directly related to development cooperation.

■ In a few words or never waste a good crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic and decisions taken by the government and the foreign ministry led to the cancellation or postponement of most of the planned systemic issues (processes, strategic documents, capacities and funding). That represents a backwards step. In some instances damage control was put in place (SAIDC flexibility, Covid-19 changes to calls etc). There were a few things that were improved such as humanitarian calls being processed in ten days (something previously declared impossible by the ministry) and the effort to include Slovak innovative and technological solutions in ODA aimed at fighting the coronavirus. However, these cannot outweigh the many areas where the situation had deteriorated. More could have been done especially in the first half of the year when the pandemic was well managed in Slovakia.

Table 3. Effects of policy decisions and Covid-19 on the Slovak ODA system

■ deterioration	■ damage control	■ improvement
country strategy papers on Kenya, Moldova and Georgia postponed by a year	SAIDC flexibility in project administration including project duration and the volunteer program.	pillar assessment of SAIDC
draft humanitarian aid strategy put on hold	one pager Covid-19 adaptability in SAIDC calls for proposals	one humanitarian Covid-19 call processed within 10 days
call for strategic partnerships canceled		focus on human rights and democracy in public discourse and PR by the MFEA
Slovak commitment to 0.33 per cent GNI under further threaten		timeline of SAIDC calls for proposals published beforehand
bilateral aid to and through Slovak NGOs to be decreased		pre-deployment consultations between diplomats and CSOs
cuts in SAIDC grants taking it back to the 10 year average		
no "new" money for Team Europe, merely redirection that will be missed elsewhere		
obligation to co-finance not removed or reduced in spite of the economic impacts of Covid-19 on NGOs		

■ deterioration	■ damage control	■ improvement
deviation from the mid-term strategy in terms of reduced attention on program countries, strategic tools and processes		
ORPO capacities used for non-ODA assignments (humanitarian aid for Italy etc)		
increased support to business sector in ODA		
increase in instrumentalization of ODA in geopolitical interests and neighborhood (e.g. calls for humanitarian aid)		
In some cases less transparency and predictability (e.g. grants for Kenya)		
continuation of large financial contribution to EU programs (e.g. project in Morocco) that are hard to access for Slovak implementers		
contribution to LDCs expected to further decrease		
no monitoring or evaluations pursued, except the evaluation of the global education program		
trips by high representatives of the MFEA and others canceled due to Covid-19 ¹⁸		
cancellation of 3 planned development diplomat postings ¹⁹		
development forums in program countries canceled		

■ What's next for us in 2021?

In 2021 the development cooperation budget line has an allocation of €8.9 million (increase due to the project in Morocco – €1.88 million). This means approximately €4–4.3 million will go on the budget for SAIDC grants. This can be viewed in two ways, despite Covid-19, the amount of grant funding will probably not decrease significantly. However, it will also depend on further advocacy in relation to the 2021 budget, or vice versa, even a pandemic Covid-19 on such a scale, which represents an urgent need to solve global and systemic problems,

¹⁸ Together with the canceled development forums, this was directly caused by the pandemic, whereas the other cases of deterioration were more deliberate in nature and controlled by the decision makers.

¹⁹ Although they do not work fully on development agenda, the three existing development diplomats are paid from the SAIDC budget at the expense of grants.

did not help to increase the amount of SAIDC grants. The same applies to the total ODA budget. The non-funding part is equally worrying and further delays in systemic improvements and aid effectiveness might be expected.

Table 4. Development cooperation in the state budget (€ m)

	■ 2018	■ 2019	■ 2020	■ 2020	■ 2021	■ 2022	■ 2023
foreign relations and assistance	160,247	197,804	155,853	157,714	154,710	151,002	152,252
foreign policy	120,442	164,884	118,880	123,778	120,624	118,791	120,041
Slovaks living abroad	1,962	2,142	7,492	7,492	3,529	3,529	3,529
development cooperation	6,174	7,826	7,047	10,535	8,913	7,038	7,038
contributions to international organizations	31,669	22,952	22,434	15,909	21,644	21,644	21,644

Source: "Vládny návrh rozpočtu verejnej správy na roky 2021 až 2023," [Government proposal for the public administration budget for 2021–2023] Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, 2020, p. 162. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=485267> (accessed on January 26, 2021).

In Genesis 41 of the Bible, the prophetic seven fat cows devoured by the lean cows represents seven years of abundance followed by another seven years of famine. In hindsight, it is hard to find any fat cows in Slovak development cooperation. In this period of sickly, ugly, thin cows what can we do to get out of it or make it last less than seven years?

■ Recommendations

The recommendations below are based on key recommendations by CSOs. Some of them can be found in "Aidwatch 2020." They need to be adapted for the Covid-19 crisis and post pandemic world. In my opinion they should be much more focused and integrated.

ODA quantity:

- to fulfill the international commitment of 0.33 per cent of GNI by 2030 and increase the overall budget to 0.21 per cent of GNI by 2024.

Develop a realistic plan to increase ODA with the involvement of other ministries and civil society and increase the budget of the bilateral part to support global education and public information as well, as an important tool of Slovak foreign policy

Focus on people and reduce inequalities:

- to focus on the least developed countries, the excluded and most vulnerable communities, including the rights and status of women, in order to meet the commitment to contribute 0.15 per cent of GNI to the least developed countries by 2030, The focus must be on people and social areas like health, education, food security

Strategic approach:

- to prepare a realistic and ambitious strategic focus, identify Slovakia's comparative advantage and develop a humanitarian aid strategy, a strategy for partnership with the private sector, a multilateral development cooperation strategy, a national strategy for global education and conceptualize a government scholarship program

Effectiveness:

- to improve the predictability and flexibility of funding, strengthen partnerships with the non-governmental sector and introduce framework contracts/strategic partnerships
- to promote a systematic and long-term focus on a smaller number of countries and sectors in order to increase the effectiveness of development cooperation, sustainability and recognizability of the SlovakAid brand

Transparency:

- to publish the point average of the members of the project committee (Foreign Ministry), the names of the members of the committee and external evaluators, the protocol for committee meetings and a more detailed description of the reasons for approval/disapproval (according to the individual point criteria)
- to make clear that consultations with an embassy as part of project preparations are welcome and not considered an attempt to influence the evaluation process

Partnership with CSOs:

- should have a more systemic, well planned, prioritized agenda and a structured dialogue with the CSOs rather than ad hoc or scattered initiatives and buzzwords

