

Advancing the 2030 Agenda Post-Corona: What Role for the G20 Italian Presidency?

by Geert Laporte and Vera Mazzara



Italy holds the G20 presidency at a crucial moment when the world is confronted with the worst global pandemic in the past century. The economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis has had major impact on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda.

In less than ten years, the world should be heading towards the realisation of 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets. Even before the pandemic, implementation was already recording major delays. Since then, the sudden advent of COVID-19 has exacerbated the already existing challenges, causing a deep crisis which will require bold and urgent global responses.

Collectively, the world will have to do more and better with less. Clearly, the

economic and social consequences of COVID-19 will be felt more amongst the 2.5 billion people living in the poorest and most vulnerable countries. This is particularly the case in Africa, that will be the most affected continent due to what has been termed the “triple hit on health, education and income”.¹ The economic progress of the past decade risks being lost and, for the first time in 20 years, poverty is likely to significantly increase.²

The dangerous cocktail of economic crisis and exploding demography could

¹ UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner, quoted in “Coronavirus Latest: EU Revises Safe Travel List, Removes Serbia and Montenegro”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 16 July 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3fO5i>.

² Albert G. Zeufack et al., *Africa's Pulse*, No. 22, October 2020. *An Analysis of Issues Shaping Africa's Economic Future*, Washington, World Bank, 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/34587>.

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impact poverty and inequality levels, and aggravate conflict and governance crises. Africa is strongly under-represented in the G20, with only South Africa amongst its members. Therefore, it will need allies to assist with the recovery of the continent. This is not an issue of charity but enlightened self-interest.

It is against this daunting background that the Italian G20 presidency will have to make a difference. While the future looks grim and no immediate miracles should be expected, the Italian presidency could help prepare the ground for a transformative change, strategically advancing the SDG agenda in both higher and lower income countries.

Italy should play the role of a catalyst within G20 to deal with the immediate effects of the crisis but also help open new windows of opportunity for innovation and change in the realisation of some of the key SDGs.

COVID-19 and the implementation of the SDG agenda

Before the outbreak of the global COVID-19 crisis, there were already clear indications that the SDGs implementation was too slow. The 2020 annual report on SDG implementation reached the conclusion that no country is effectively on track.³ The biggest challenges can be identified in key

³ Jeffrey Sachs et al., *The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19. Sustainable Development Report 2020*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, June 2020, <https://www.sdgindex.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2020>.

areas that have the biggest impact on the developing world (see box below).⁴

- The SDG 1 - No poverty: Increased poverty due to job losses and economic lockdown, with stronger impact on vulnerable groups;
- SDG 2 - Zero hunger: Increase in food insecurity due to reduction in global food supplies and trade;
- SDG 3 - Good health and wellbeing: No country has achieved so-called herd immunity and there is a higher disease incidence and mortality from COVID-19 and higher mortality from other causes because of overburdening of health systems;
- SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth: widespread economic crisis, business closures and public deficit;
- SDG 10 - Reduced inequalities: COVID-19 had disproportionately negative health and economic impacts on vulnerable groups. This is particularly true in the case of countries with weaker safety nets.

The challenges posed by COVID-19 impact several layers, including the socio-economic situation, globally but particularly in Africa, and on climate, health and migration. Moreover, COVID-19 has also been a magnifying glass for inequalities and has impacted participatory decision-making by shrinking the democratic governance space.

⁴ Ibid., p. vi, 4-5.

However, this crisis also offers some important opportunities, such as the possibility to share winning experiences and good practices to respond to the pandemic, especially in the African continent (i.e. the coordinating role played by the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention).⁵ To build on these achievements, more funds should be invested on strengthening the role of public health and disease prevention and surveillance, and to promote efforts to achieve universal health care.

The COVID-19 crisis has also boosted awareness of the interconnectedness between various components of the 2030 Agenda. According to Carlos Lopes, African Union High Representative for AU–EU Relations: “The post-COVID-19 world offers Africa an important opportunity to revitalise its economy under a green framework that supports a healthy and prosperous people while safeguarding the global commons.”⁶

What role for Italy's G20 presidency?

While a G20 presidency generally plays a rather modest role, this year should not be characterised by a business as usual approach given the unprecedented health and socio-economic crisis the world is facing. In the run-up to the G20 Leaders' Summit of October, Italy could help speed the implementation

⁵ David Pilling, “Africa's Covid-19 Response Is a Glimpse of How Things Could Be Different”, in *Financial Times*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/124dd4f4-8a0b-11ea-9dcb-fe6871f4145a>.

⁶ Carlos Lopes, “How a Climate-Smart COVID-19 Recovery Could Lead to a More Resilient Africa”, in *Accord Analyses*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.accord.org.za/?p=31172>.

of some of the most crucial SDGs and international cooperation agendas by prioritising three types of actions:

(i) Mobilise international solidarity for the most affected and vulnerable

In the short-term, the G20 and the broader international community should provide emergency support to the health systems and ensure a fair distribution of vaccines to the poorest and most vulnerable regions in the world.

In the medium and longer term, this should be followed by the mobilisation of substantial support to help offset the secondary economic impacts of COVID-19, particularly in Africa. This will be quite challenging as the global crisis is likely to reduce official development assistance (ODA) budgets. Remittances, trade and foreign direct investment flows are also seriously affected.

Italy could take the lead in promoting new sources of financing for sustainable development such as blended finance and new solidarity taxes. It could also take initiatives amongst the G20 members for major debt relief initiatives for African states, many of which now spends roughly 25 per cent of its budget on debt service. A G20 agreement on a common framework for debt relief, with the full involvement of China as one of the major creditors in Africa, seems essential. The funds released from the debt cancellation could be directed towards financing the achievement of SDGs.

Following this line of thought, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, and Joseph Borrell, the EU High Representative, recently called for the G20 to agree on an ambitious debt relief programme for those African countries whose economy has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

The G20 should work not only to increase the quantity of aid flows but also improve their quality. Joint action to build coherent responses for a sustainable post-COVID recovery will be needed more than ever to tackle the growing poverty and inequality gaps in Africa (SDG 10). To make this happen, major efforts should also be made to move away from exclusive state-to-state cooperation, avoiding the trap of clientelism under poor governance conditions.

Italy could systematically push the G20 and other international partners to support populations that are most in need and those players who are able to generate the greatest development impacts. Creative solutions will have to be found to reach out to the dynamic – mostly young – driving forces in Africa: grassroot and community-based organisations, entrepreneurial start-ups in new economic sectors such as digitisation and green transformation, as well as the large informal sectors that are most affected by this crisis.⁸

⁷ European Commission, *Communication on the Global EU Response to COVID 19* (JOIN/2020/11), 8 April 2020, p. 11, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0011>.

⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, *Remarks by President von der Leyen at the Joint Press Statement with Moussa Faki, Chairperson of the African Union Commission*, Addis Ababa, 7 December 2019,

Last but not least, it is important to avoid creating new dependencies. While increased humanitarian and development finance will be needed in the recovery phase, this should always be a temporary solution and not the beginning of a new vicious cycle of dependency, gap-filling and vested aid interests. Support by the G20 and the international community should always focus on creating more sustainable, resilient, people-centred and equal societies.

(ii) Restore confidence in the multilateral system to guide SDG implementation

The crisis of multilateralism reached its peak under the Trump administration. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased awareness that a well-functioning multilateral system and international cooperation are essential to cope with global crises. Yet, major reforms are needed to maintain the credibility and efficiency of multilateralism.

As a committed EU and multilateral player, Italy could push multilateral agendas amongst G20 members. Having itself been a major victim of the pandemic, Italy could stress the need to strengthen global solidarity in the health sector, particularly in the most vulnerable countries. It could strongly support the call of some G20 members for a more prominent lead role of the World Health Organisation in fostering common responses to health issues.⁹

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6697.

⁹ “Only victory in Africa can end the pandemic everywhere”, in *Financial Times*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/8f76a4c6-7d7a-11ea-82f6-150830b3b99a>.

Beyond the immediate health concerns, Italy could also use its G20 presidency to push other urgent global agendas, including those related to climate change, environmental issues, global trade and international conflicts resolution.

The role of global, continental and regional organisations in pursuing cross border agendas is essential. Within the European Union, Italy is well placed to play a bridging role in the rapprochement between Europe and Africa.¹⁰ Specifically, when it comes to African regional integration, Italy could mobilise increased support within the G20 for the African Union (AU) and regional economic communities (RECs) as well as the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – which formally entered into force on 1 January 2021.

Moreover, in the implementation of the SDGs, the role of secondary/intermediary cities should also be highlighted. The EU has clearly expressed support to the efforts to localise the SDGs.¹¹

Last but not least, Italy should contribute to preparing, with other G20 countries, the long-awaited reforms of the UN system. The latter are the product of the past and there is now a pressing need to bring about change and reform of

the global governance system, in order to make it credible for the non-Western world. These are long-term processes but COVID-19 could be an accelerator of these necessary reform processes that seek to restore trust in multilateralism.

(iii) Invest in governance to make SDG implementation work

The impact of COVID-19 on healthcare systems, economies and societies will be felt most in the developing world. This crisis has reminded us of the key importance of well-functioning states and public sectors that are capable of building healthy, prosperous and fair societies. External partners should show solidarity but cannot be a substitute for the responsibilities of developing countries.

Governance reforms in the developing world, such as the capacity to mobilise domestic resources and fair taxation systems, will be crucial in tackling poverty and growing inequalities resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. In that context, SDG 16 referring to peace, justice and strong institutions should be given utmost importance. The majority of conflict-related crises globally – and particularly in Africa – are rooted in weak and poor governance systems.

Democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and effective and accountable states that care about their populations are more needed than ever. Yet, for some governments this COVID-19 crisis offers a pretext to impose freedom restricting measures and postpone or manipulate electoral processes. In some parts of Africa, it has also given rise to new conflicts in

¹⁰ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *A Partnership with Africa*, December 2020, https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2021/01/a_partnership_with_africa_en.pdf.

¹¹ Agnieszka Widuto, "Sustainable Development Goals in EU Regions", in *EPRS Briefings*, December 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659415](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)659415).



countries that were seen to be relatively stable and development committed, such as Ethiopia.

Choices will have to be made also within the G20, between liberal democratic or illiberal authoritarian societal and governance models. This is an area where the Italian G20 presidency should play a role *par excellence*, sometimes against other G20 members who do not always seem to care about structural and participatory governance reforms. The role of local civil society actors and valorisation of youth is absolutely key in this regard. But any action by external partners aimed at supporting better governance systems can only be successful if it is done with a good dose of realism and modesty as to what is realistically possible.

An ambitious agenda ahead

The Italian G20 presidency comes at a crucial moment in time, when the world is still struggling with the COVID-19 health crisis and its socio-economic impacts. It can be expected that this will further delay the implementation of Agenda 2030. Yet, in spite of all the hardship, COVID-19 also provides new opportunities.

The Italian presidency could, in fact, be an accelerator of innovation. More specifically, it could be the catalyst of new forms of international solidarity towards most vulnerable countries and populations. Beyond sustained aid levels, innovative finance for development and debt cancellation, Italy's G20 presidency could also play a role in promoting domestic governance reforms in developing

countries, stimulating innovative and green economic transformation and the restoration of trust in the global multilateral system.

All of this makes for quite an impressive and ambitious agenda for the G20 – but the urgency of the situation requires swift action to deal with this unprecedented global crisis.

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