



Italians and Development Cooperation in 2023

Research report prepared by
DISPOC/LAPS (University of Siena) and IAI

December 2023



METHODOLOGICAL NOTE and AUTHORS

The survey was conducted by the Laboratory for Political and Social Analysis ("LAPS") at the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences ("DISPOC") of the University of Siena between 6 and 8 September 2023. During the survey period, a sample of 1,026 individuals were interviewed, all of Italian nationality and at least 18 years old, having access to the Internet. That sample was selected within an "opt-in" online panel kept and managed by CINT. For the extraction of the sample a sampling method was used involving stratification by gender and age bracket, area of residence and level of education, based on parameters of the Italian adult population with access to the Internet. The questionnaire was constructed in modules. The survey was conducted using the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method. The data presented in this report were further weighted for sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age group, area of residence, and educational level) based on the distributions of the adult Italian population with Internet access.

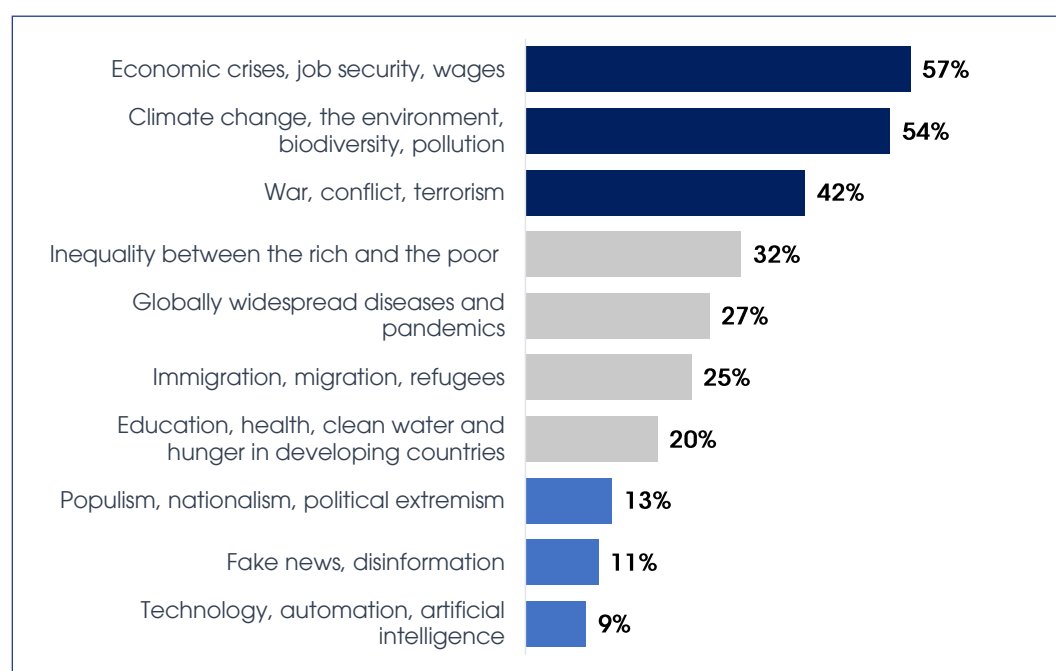
This report was written by Irene Paviotti (IAI) in collaboration with Rossella Borri and Pierangelo Isernia (LAPS).

What do Italians think about development cooperation? This was the topic that IAI, in collaboration with the Laboratory for Political and Social Analysis (LAPS) at the University of Siena, decided to investigate through a sample survey conducted in September 2023. The 2023 questionnaire included some of the questions from the 2022 edition,¹ reformulating them, and expanding the survey with additional and specific questions on current topics in the realm of Italian development cooperation. This report will present the results of the survey in its four main themes: general relations with partner countries; Italian development cooperation and Official Development Assistance (ODA); migration; and active citizenship.

General attitudes and relations with developing countries

The survey began with a general question about the *current issues* that concern respondents the most.

■ **Figure 1. Main concerns**



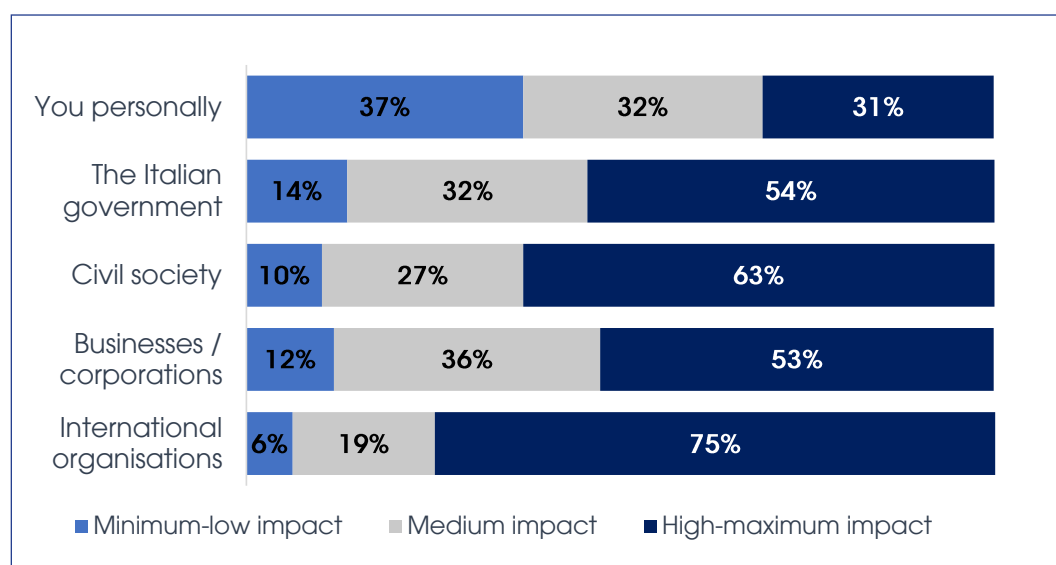
Question: *Which of the following issues personally concerns you the most? Indicate up to three answers in order of importance.* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

¹ IAI and LAPS, *Italians and Official Development Assistance*, Rome, IAI, December 2022, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16312>.

Income inequality and low levels of development in partner countries² are the fourth and seventh most significant concerns for the Italians interviewed – 32% and 20% of the sample mentioned these two issues as priorities, respectively. Economic crises were the most frequently mentioned (57% of the sample), followed by climate change (54%) and wars (42%) (Figure 1).

Although developing countries issues are not among Italian citizens’ top concerns, 51% of those surveyed believe that what happens in developing countries has an impact on people living in Italy, and 80% have expressed genuine *concern about poverty levels* in developing countries. Looking at how to remedy these inequalities, the relative majority of respondents (37%) believe that single individuals have the least *impact on poverty levels*, while the greatest impact is attributed to international organisations such as the United Nations (75% of the sample), followed by civil society organisations (63%). 55% and 53% of the sample believe that the Italian government and private companies, respectively, can have a very strong impact on inequalities (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Impact on poverty levels in developing countries



Question: *On a scale from 0 to 10, how much of a difference, if any, do you think each of the following can make in reducing poverty levels in developing countries?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

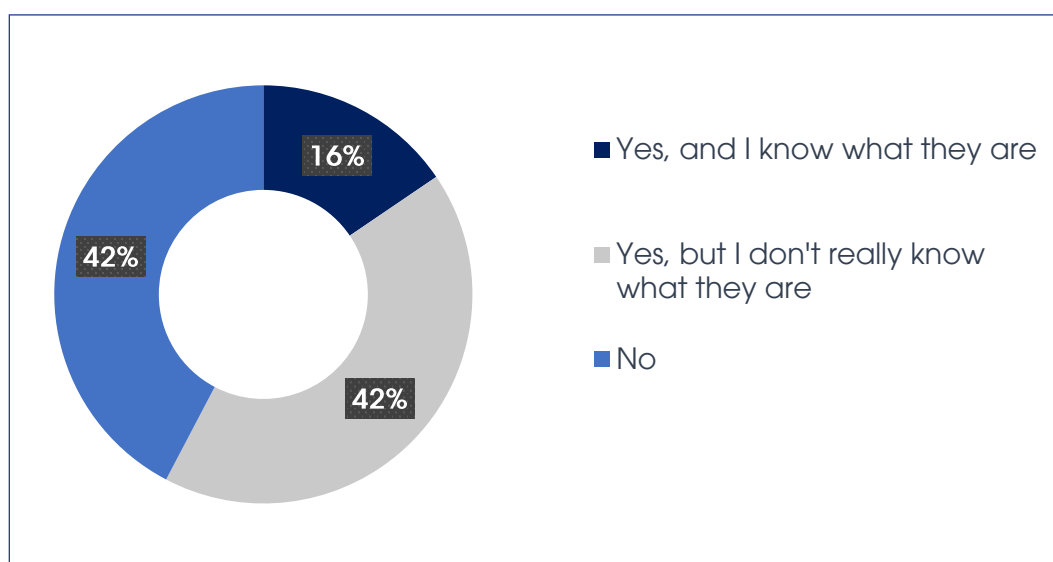
Note: values from 0 to 3 were categorised as “minimum-low impact”; those between 4 and 6 as “medium impact”; and from 7 to 10 as “high-maximum impact”.

² Although a term that is rightfully contested, the survey used “developing countries” to refer to Italy’s partner countries with generally lower levels of income and socio-economic development. This choice was dictated by the need to ensure that the questions were as clear as possible to the respondents; therefore we opted for a term that is still widely used in common language.

Italian development cooperation and ODA

Before analysing the attitudes of Italian citizens towards Italian development cooperation, we sought to assess the *level of knowledge* among citizens on these issues with some knowledge-based questions. First, respondents were asked if they had ever heard of the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Only 16% stated that they had heard of them and knew what they were, while the rest of the sample was divided between those who had never heard of them (42%) and those who claimed to have heard of them but did not know exactly what they were (42%), as illustrated in Figure 3. A similar question was asked in the 2022 edition of the survey, and the percentage of respondents who then stated that they had never heard of the SDGs was slightly higher than the current figure, at 42.5%.³

■ **Figure 3. Knowledge of SDGs**

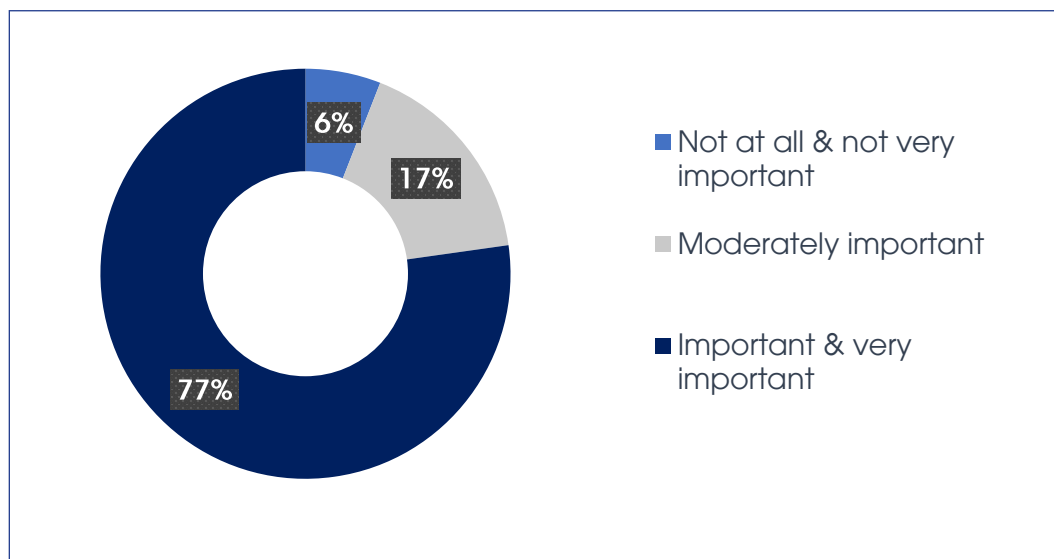


Question: *Have you ever heard of or read about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

After answering the question about familiarity with the Sustainable Development Goals, participants who indicated that they had limited or no knowledge on this topic were given the opportunity to read a detailed information page about the SDGs. In the subsequent question, which investigated how important respondents believed it was for Italy to take the SDGs into account in its domestic and foreign policies, 78% of the sample responded positively (Figure 4).

³ IAI and LAPS, *Italians and Official Development Assistance*, cit., p. 5-6.

■ **Figure 4. Importance of SDGs in Italian policies**



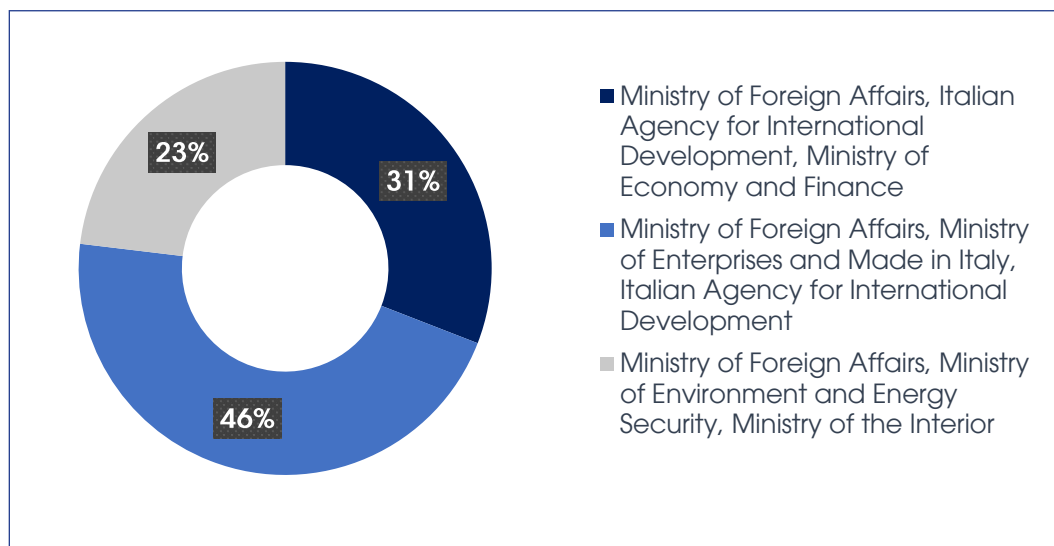
Question: *On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates "not at all important" and 10 "very important", how important do you think it is for Italy to consider the Sustainable Development Goals in its domestic and foreign policies?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

Note: Values from 0 to 3 were categorised as "not at all & not very important"; those between 4 and 6 as "moderately important"; and those between 7 and 10 as "important & very important".

On the knowledge-related topic, it is interesting to note that in 2023, knowledge of the *main actors in Italian development cooperation* is still low.⁴ A relative majority of respondents (46%) believe that the main governmental actors are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development Cooperation (MAECI), the Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy (formerly the Ministry of Economic Development, MISE), and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS). Only 31% correctly identified MAECI, AICS, and the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) as the main actors (Figure 5).

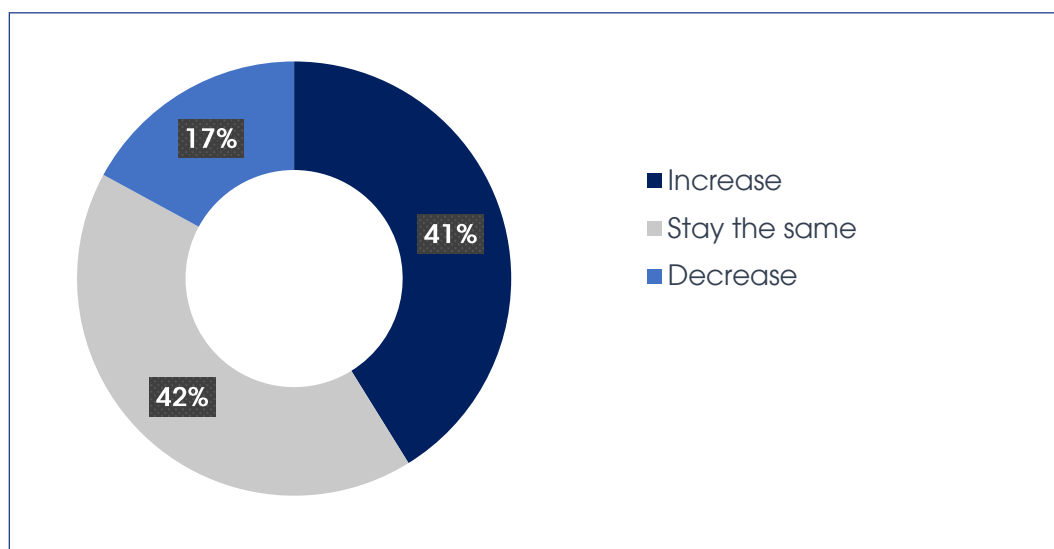
⁴ In 2022, 57.8% of respondents had identified the Ministry of Economic Development as the main ministry responsible for managing ODA. Ibid., p. 5.

■ **Figure 5. Main actors in Italian development cooperation**



Question: *Who do you think are the main actors in Italy's development cooperation?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

■ **Figure 6. Should resources for ODA be increased or decreased?**



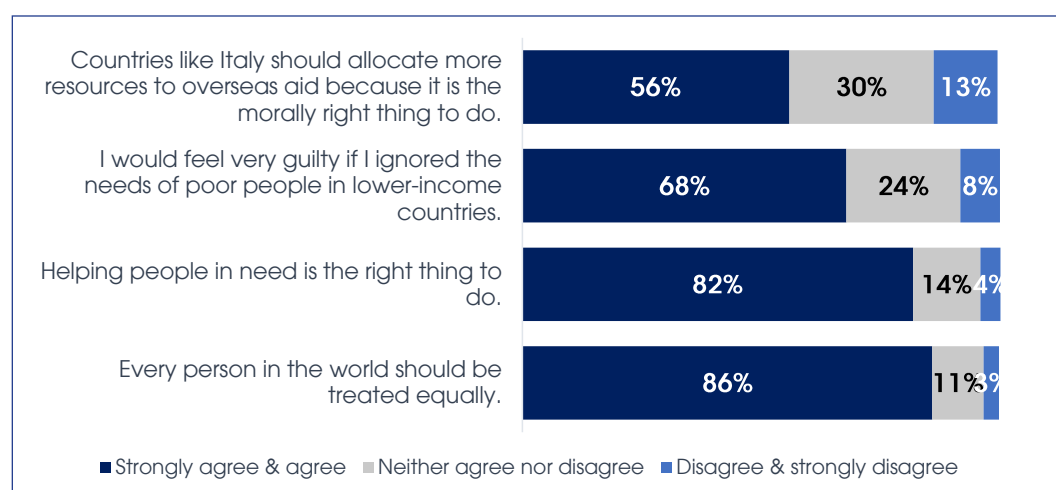
Question: *In 2022, of its Gross National Income (GNI) of around 1,900 billion euros, the Italian government spent 0.32% (approximately 6.2 billion euros) on Official Development Assistance. Do you think that the government should increase or decrease the amount of money that it spends on aid to lower-income countries?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

On the issue of the *resources* that the Italian government allocates annually to cooperation with partner countries, the responses from the interviewees provide an interesting picture of public opinion. 61% of the sample believes that the Italian

government should be (very) generous in providing aid to partner countries. When asked whether to increase or decrease the current level of this aid, a relative majority (42%) believes that the level of ODA should remain at current levels, closely followed by 41% of the sample who believe that these resources should increase (Figure 6). These figures are relatively similar to the levels of support for ODA spending recorded in the 2022 edition of the survey, i.e. greater support for the status quo in ODA spending, followed closely by support for an increase.⁵

The data on the *general attitude* of Italians towards the topic of *aid* allows us to put these responses into perspective. 82% of respondents believe that helping people in need is “the right thing to do”, and 68% stated that they would feel “very guilty” if they ignored “the needs of poor people in developing countries”. The idea that “countries like Italy should allocate more resources to official development assistance because it is morally right” is supported by the majority of the sample, although less strongly than the other statements, with a 56% approval rate (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Attitudes towards aid



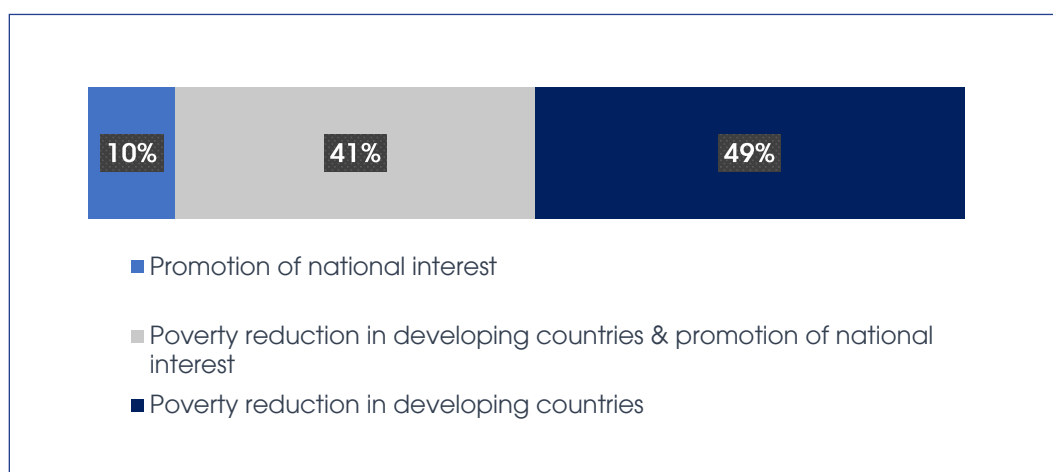
Question: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

The lower support for increasing ODA because it is morally right can be considered in relation to the responses regarding the purpose of resources for development cooperation. When asked to position themselves on a spectrum with the promotion of Italy’s national interest at one end and poverty reduction in partner countries at the other, 49% of respondents stated that the primary purpose of ODA should be *poverty reduction in partner countries*, while only 10% believe that ODA should exclusively promote the *national interest*. 41% of respondents, on the other hand,

⁵ In the 2022 edition of the survey, this question had been asked in three different formulations to respective subgroups of the sample. Ibid., p. 6-7.

took an intermediate position, stating that ODA should aim to promote both Italy's national interest and poverty reduction in partner countries (Figure 8).

■ **Figure 8. ODA's main purpose**



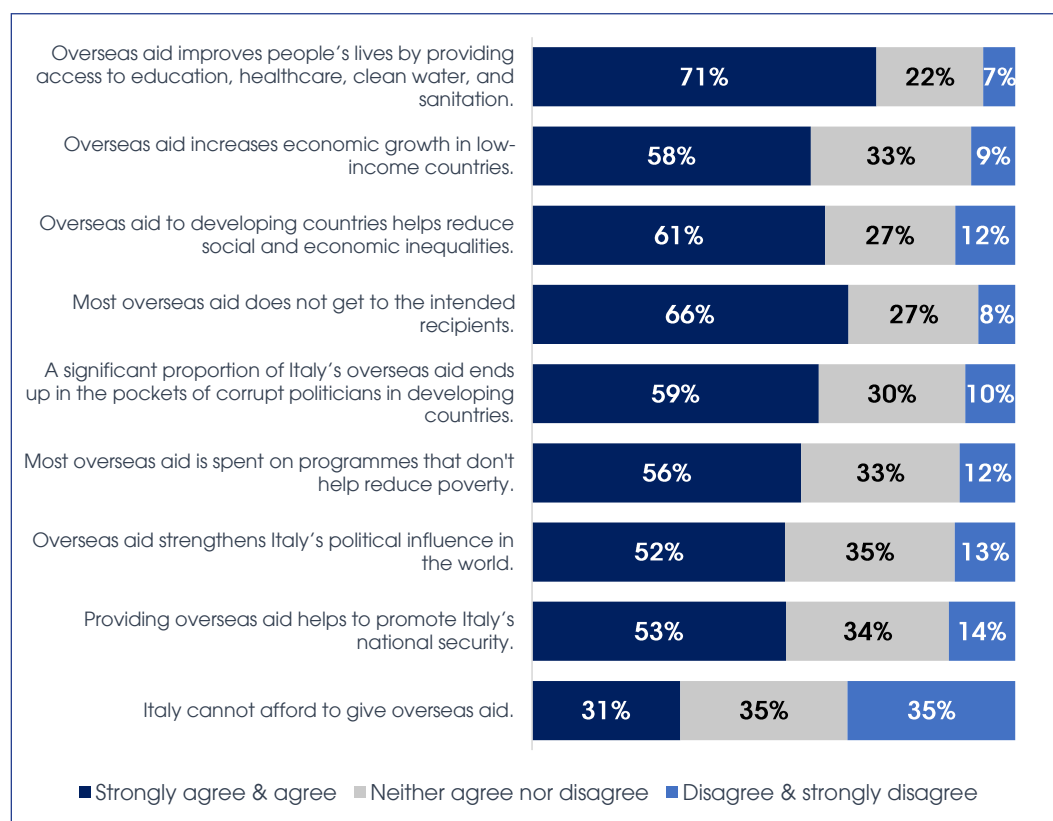
Question: [On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that the purpose of ODA should be the exclusive promotion of Italy's national interest and 10 means that the purpose of ODA should be the exclusive reduction of poverty in poor countries], what do you think the primary purpose of overseas aid should be? Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

When investigating Italians' opinion on the *effectiveness* of Italian ODA, the relative majority (44% of the sample) believe that it is on average effective, followed by 37% who believe it is (very) effective. Reactions to a series of statements about ODA help understand these data. 71% of respondents believe that ODA helps improve the quality of life, providing access to education, health, clean water, and sanitation services; 58% agree with the statement "ODA increases economic growth in low-income countries", and 61% say that ODA helps reduce socio-economic inequalities. However, equally high percentages of people believe that ODA does not reach its intended beneficiaries (66%), enriches corrupt politicians in partner countries (59%), and that most ODA is spent on programmes that do not help reduce poverty (56%), as shown in Figure 9. The majority of the sample seems to support logically opposite statements, similar to what was recorded in 2022.⁶ Acquiescence bias, where respondents tend to agree with the statements presented to them,⁷ could be an explanation for this clear divergence.

⁶ In 2022, a significant percentage of the sample simultaneously believed that APS helped promote the economic development (83%) and self-sufficiency (69%) of partner countries, and that it was being wasted (45%), creating dependence (56%), and being appropriated by corrupt political classes in partner countries (79%). *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

⁷ Timothy R. Graeff, "Response Bias", in Kimberly Kempf-Leonard (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*, Vol. 3, Elsevier Science, 2005, p. 411-418, DOI 10.1016/B0-12-369398-5/00037-2.

■ **Figure 9. Opinions on ODA**

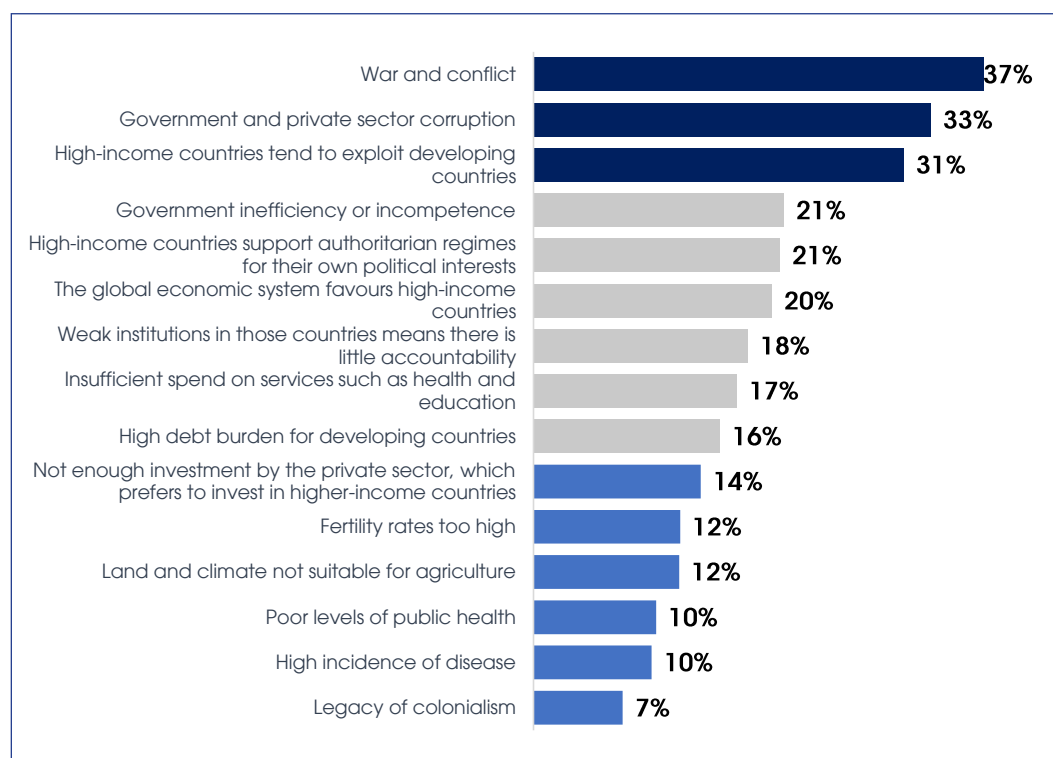


Question: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Italy's overseas aid?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

However, it is important to note that government and private sector corruption have been identified as the second major *obstacle to the socio-economic development of partner countries* (33%), after wars and conflicts (37%), as shown in Figure 10, suggesting that corruption plays a significant role in cooperation and development policies according to the respondents.⁸

⁸ In 2022, the two main obstacles to the socio-economic development of partner countries identified by respondents were the same: wars were first, mentioned in 52% of cases, followed by corruption (48%). The third most cited obstacle, however, was "bad policies of governments in developing countries", at 45%. IAI-LAPS survey 2022.

■ **Figure 10. Obstacles to socio-economic development**



Question: *Given the following items, what do you think are the three main obstacles to developing countries' socio-economic development? Please indicate a maximum of three answers in order of importance.* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

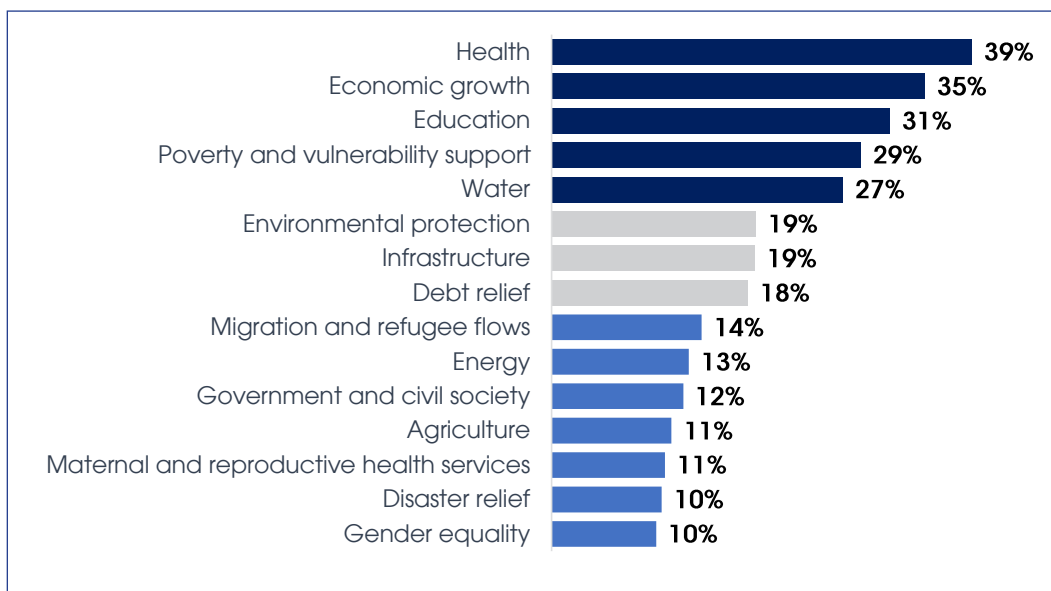
On the more operational side of ODA, the *spending areas* that respondents have identified as priorities are health (39%), economic growth (35%), and education (31%), followed by interventions to support welfare systems to reduce poverty (29%) and access to clean water (27%). Services for maternal and reproductive health, disaster relief, and gender equality are the areas that received the fewest mentions, at 11%, 10%, and 10%, respectively (Figure 11). These priorities are slightly different from 2022 when economic growth was at the top (53%), followed by infrastructure development in second place (43%), and health and education in the third and fourth positions, respectively (41% and 40%).⁹

Considering the *geographical areas* that Italian ODA should prioritise, Sub-Saharan Africa was mentioned in 25% of cases – the highest percentage – followed by countries in the South Mediterranean region (Northern Africa – 17%) and the Middle East (12%). Among the least mentioned were the countries of the Asia-Pacific and Oceania, Central Asia, and the Balkans (Figure 12). These data mirror the results of the 2022 survey, where Sub-Saharan Africa, the Southern Mediterranean, and the

⁹ IAI-LAPS survey 2022.

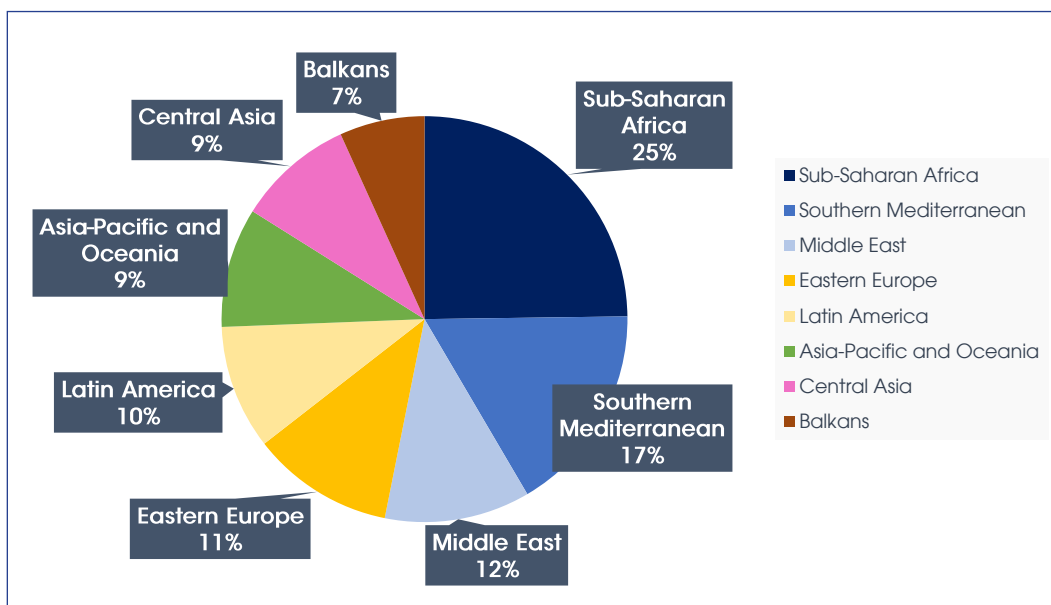
Middle East were the top three geographical areas mentioned.¹⁰

Figure 11. Priority expenditure items for ODA



Question: *Going back to government spending on overseas aid in developing countries, please indicate what you think are the first, second, and third most important priorities.* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

Figure 12. Priority regions for Italian ODA



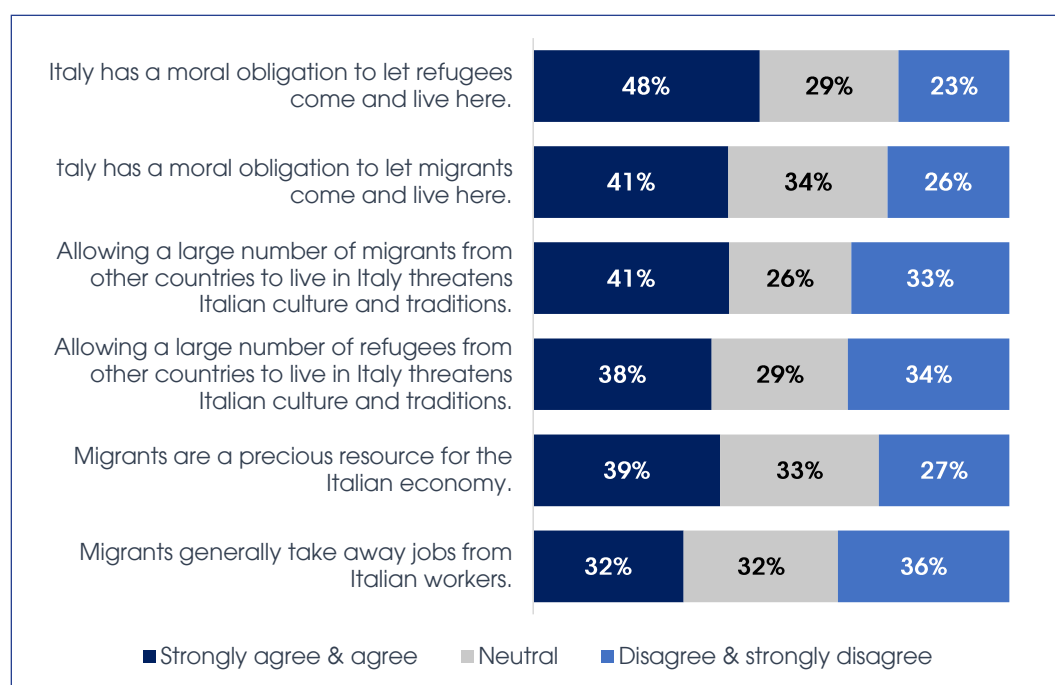
Question: *In what areas of the world do you think Italy should primarily direct its official development assistance (ODA) allocations? Please indicate a maximum of three answers in order of importance.* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

¹⁰ IAI-LAPS survey 2022.

Attitudes towards migration

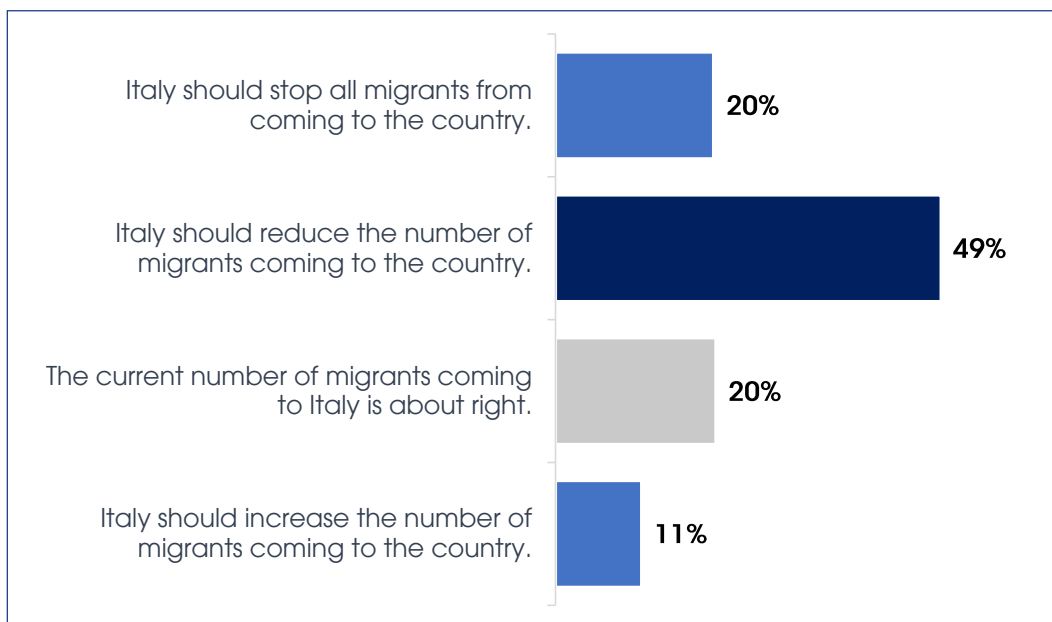
A section of the 2023 questionnaire was dedicated to investigating Italians' attitudes towards migration flows, distinguishing between migrants (persons who move due to lack of opportunities, mainly in economic terms) and refugees (persons who move because they are persecuted or in danger). Looking at *migrants*, 36% of respondents disagree with the statement that migrants take jobs away from Italians – a slightly higher percentage than those who agree and those who have a neutral stance (32% each). 41% agree with the idea that a high number of migrants in Italy represents a threat to Italian culture and traditions – only 33% disagree – but the relative majority (39%) still believe that migrants are a valuable resource for the Italian economy, and 41% believe that Italy has a moral obligation to allow migrants to move and live in the country (Figure 13). It is also interesting to note that when asked whether they considered specific aspects of living with migrants, such as in the workplace or within families, to be positive or negative, the absolute majority expressed neutrality. However, 49% of the sample believes that Italy should reduce the number of migrants entering the country (Figure 14), and when asked if providing ODA is an effective way to reduce the flow of migrants, 59% agreed (Figure 15).

■ **Figure 13. Opinions on migrants and refugees**



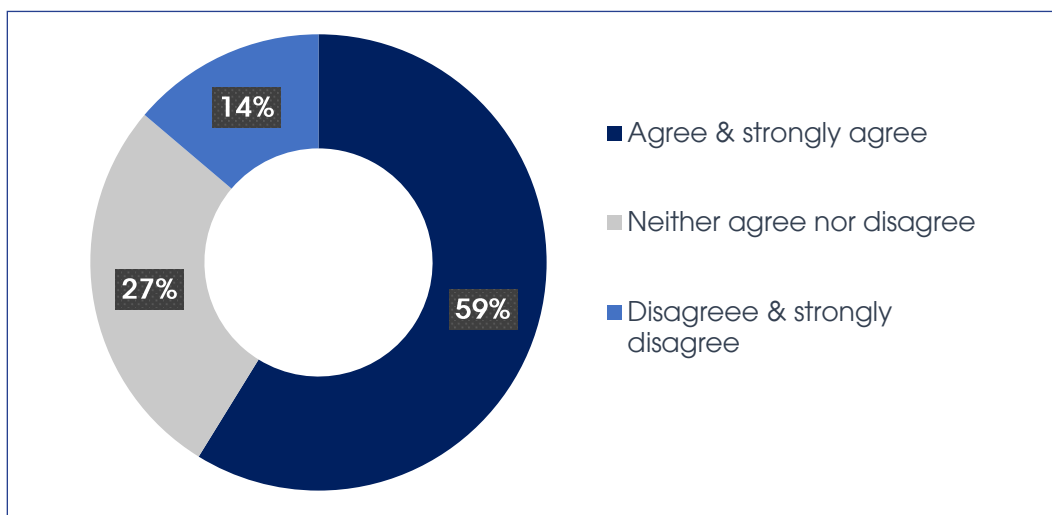
Question: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

■ **Figure 14. Views on the number of migrants**



Question: Which of the following statements comes closest to your view? Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

■ **Figure 15. ODA to decrease migration flows**

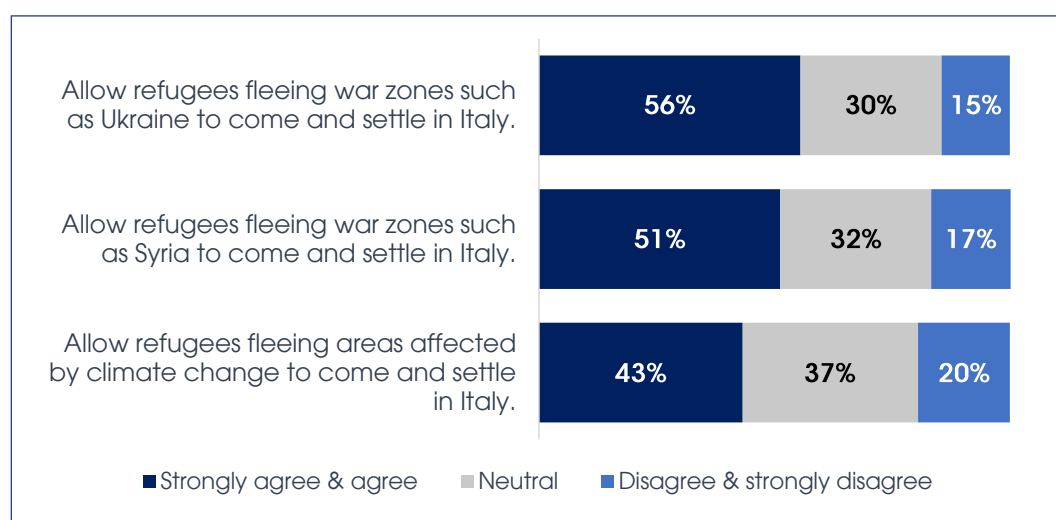


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Providing overseas aid to developing countries is an effective way to address migration". Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

With regards to *refugees*, the common sentiment appears to be slightly different. As shown in Figure 13, a smaller number of respondents believe that a high number of refugees in Italy threatens Italian culture and traditions (38%), and the idea that it is a moral obligation to allow refugees to live in Italy is more widely accepted (48%),

seven percentage points higher than in the case of migrants). Yet there seems to be a different attitude depending on the origin of the refugees. The sample was randomly divided into two groups, each presented with a different set of statements to express their level of agreement or disagreement. When referring to refugees from conflict areas such as Ukraine and refugees from areas affected by climate change, 56% favoured welcoming the former, compared to 43% for the latter. When referring to refugees from conflict zones like Syria, the percentage of respondents in favour of welcoming them slightly decreased to 51% (Figure 16). Similar results were observed in the population of the United Kingdom in 2022.¹¹

Figure 16. Attitudes towards refugees



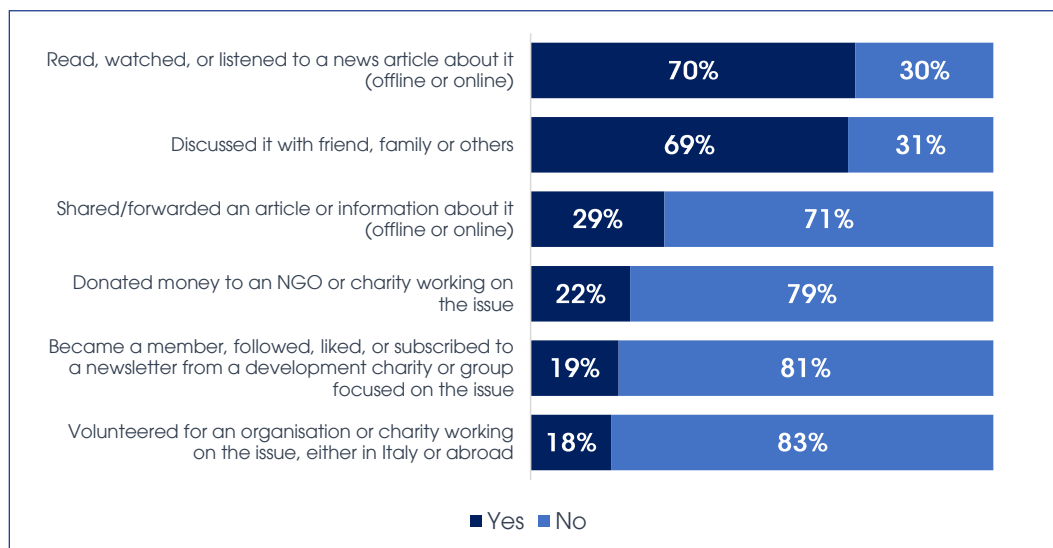
Question: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? "Italy should..."*.
 Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

Active citizenship

The 2023 survey also examined the *active involvement* of respondents in development cooperation initiatives in the last twelve months. The majority stated that they had received information and discussed topics related to poverty and development within their social circles (70% and 69% of the sample, respectively). These figures decrease significantly when considering levels of involvement beyond information: 21% made a donation to organisations dealing with these issues; 19% participated in the activities of these organisations in a more or less passive manner (such as becoming a member, following their social media pages, etc.); and only 18% engaged in volunteering activities in Italy or abroad (Figure 17).

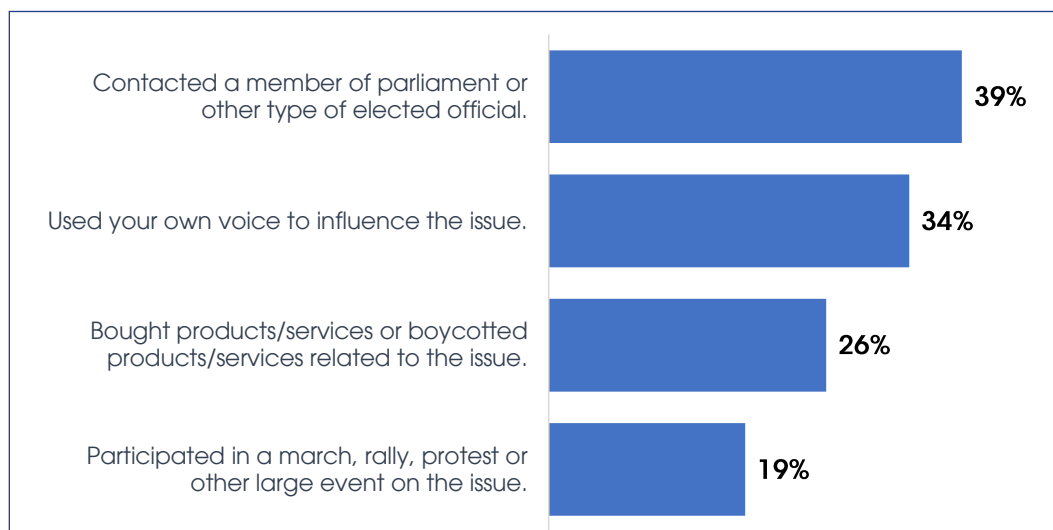
¹¹ Paolo Morini and David Hudson, "Ukraine: Survey Shows British People, and Especially Tory Voters, Feel Very Differently about Some Refugees than Others", in *The Conversation*, 4 July 2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-survey-shows-british-people-and-especially-tory-voters-feel-very-differently-about-some-refugees-than-others-186068>.

Figure 17. Engagement in poverty reduction and development activities



Question: *Thinking about global poverty and development, which of the following have you done in the past 12 months?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

Figure 18. Engagement in activities pro/against development cooperation



Question: *Which of the following activities have you carried out in the past 12 months in support of or in opposition to cooperation initiatives with developing countries?* Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

Similarly, when asked if respondents had carried out activities in favour of or against government development cooperation initiatives, only 15% stated that they had engaged in activities in favour, while 10% had been engaged in activities against them. The majority (75%) had not carried out in any such activities. Among the activities carried out by the 25% of the sample who responded positively, respondents

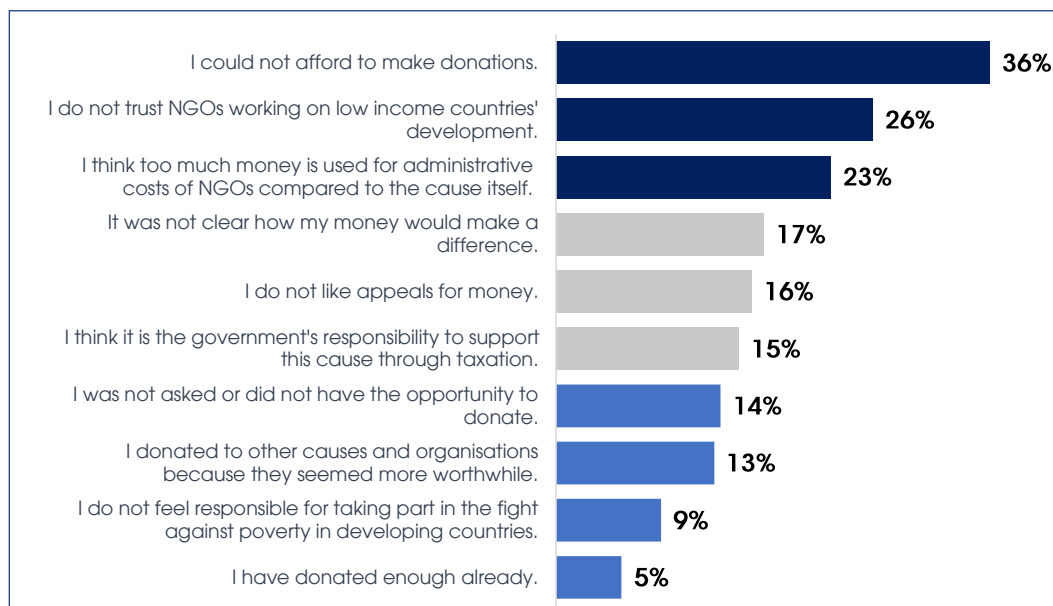
mentioned contacting parliamentarians or government officials (39%), personally trying to make an impact on the issue (34%), boycotting or buying products related to poverty and development issues (26%) and participating in protests or other public events (19%), as shown in Figure 18. It is interesting to read these relatively low levels of active involvement in development cooperation activities in the context of the low impact that respondents perceive they have on poverty levels in partner countries, as mentioned earlier (Figure 2). Furthermore, when comparing these data with the 2022 survey results, the 2023 data seem to indicate a lower level of active involvement. In the 2022 survey, 41% of the sample had stated that they did not engage in any of the development cooperation activities listed; among those who had engaged in at least one, donations, the purchase of fair-trade products, and signing petitions were the main actions reported by respondents, at 36%, 23%, and 20%, respectively.¹²

As regards the issue of active citizenship, a series of questions also sought to analyse the relationship between respondents and *civil society organisations* (CSOs), which are perceived as the actors with the second-largest impact on poverty levels in partner countries (Figure 2). Only 21% of the sample stated that they had made donations to CSOs in recent months (Figure 17). Among the reasons respondents indicated for not making donations, a lack of trust was the second most commonly cited factor (26%), after a lack of financial means (35%) (Figure 19). This data appears to be in contrast with the data regarding general levels of trust in CSOs that specifically deal with development cooperation. 37% of the sample stated that they trust these organisations to a moderate extent, and another 36% trust them to a great extent.

In an attempt to understand the reasons for *distrust* in CSOs, the group of participants who indicated a low level of trust in these organisations (approximately 27% of the sample) were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with some statements related to the actions of these actors. 84% of this subgroup believes that these organisations use their funds in a manner that is not very transparent, and 59% think that these funds could instead be used for the benefit of Italian citizens. In addition, according to 72% of this group of respondents, the impact of interventions carried out by CSOs is low or difficult to determine, and 57% believe that their activities unintentionally encourage migration flows (Figure 20).

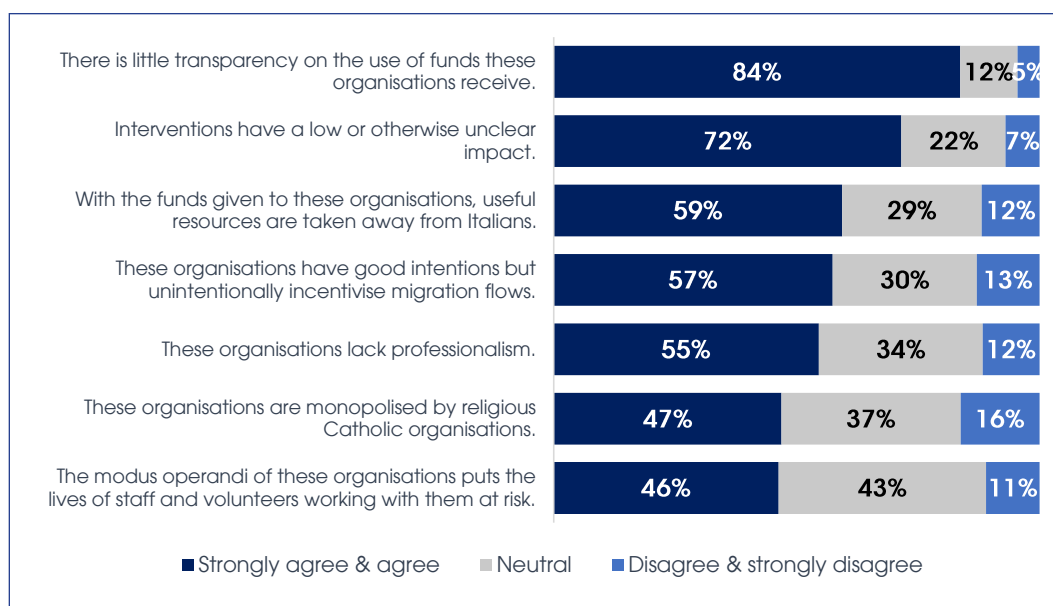
¹² IAI and LAPS, *Italians and Official Development Assistance*, cit., p. 11.

Figure 19. Reasons not to donate to civil society organisations



Question: Which of the following statements best describes why you have not donated to NGOs or associations working on poverty and development in the past 12 months? You can choose up to three answers in order of importance. Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

Figure 20. Reasons (not) to trust development cooperation NGOs



Question: To explain your level of trust in NGOs and associations involved in development cooperation, to what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? Source: IAI-LAPS survey 2023.

To summarise

What image do these data provide about Italians and development cooperation in 2023? Despite global poverty not being one of their primary concerns, Italians are somewhat worried about global socio-economic inequalities, not only due to their impact on the lives of citizens in Italy but also for moral reasons – it's right to help those in need. When it comes to methods to solve this problem, namely public resources allocated to development cooperation (ODA), Italians have limited knowledge of the reference framework (SDGs) and who the main responsible actors are. They believe that the current level of ODA is adequate to address the challenges of cooperation, which should primarily focus on poverty reduction rather than pursuing national interests. However, the purpose of ODA seems less clear-cut when it comes to migration, with a significant percentage of respondents favouring the use of ODA to reduce migration flows, which are generally viewed negatively. Italian public opinion is also relatively unengaged in activities to reduce socio-economic inequalities, and despite there being medium to high levels of trust in civil society organisations that conduct such activities, there are also doubts about their transparency and potential incentives for migration flows. The discrepancy recorded between responses to some questions lays the groundwork for further exploration of Italy's public opinion on specific aspects of ODA and development cooperation more broadly.

Report produced in the context of the partnership with Focus 2030 and presented at the conference “La cooperazione italiana allo sviluppo alle soglie del 2024”, organised in Rome on 11 December 2023.

The project is carried out with the support of



Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo