

# **The role of the EU's development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic**

2020/2118(INI) - 03/05/2021 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Development adopted an own-initiative report prepared by Hildegard BENTELE (EPP, DE) and Norbert NEUSER (S&D, DE) on the role of the EU's development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is a global pandemic affecting every country in the world but the economic and social impact of the pandemic has been felt most strongly in developing countries. The pandemic has greatly exacerbated the existing debt problems of developing countries, undermining their efforts to mobilise sufficient resources to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## ***Team Europe approach***

While welcoming the EU's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Members called for significant new resources to be mobilised in a flexible way to help developing countries around the world address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Making safe vaccines, treatments, equipment, therapeutics and diagnostics available globally in a fast, equitable and affordable manner must be one of the first steps. Members welcomed COVAX, a global scheme to ensure equitable and universal access to COVID-19 vaccines, and the strong support of 'Team Europe', which is the largest donor and has so far allocated more than EUR 850 million to the initiative. They stressed that safe vaccines should be made easily accessible and affordable for all, insisting that health workers and the most vulnerable people should be given priority.

The report called on the 'Team Europe' to strengthen effective mechanisms to ensure policy coherence for sustainable development. The EU and Member States should allocate additional funds to countries that will suffer the greatest impact of the pandemic.

## ***Food security***

Stressing that the pandemic threatens food security in rural, urban and peri-urban settings, Members stressed the development of resilient food systems and the need for a global transformation to accelerate the development of equitable, safe and healthy food systems, using the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 as an opportunity to better rebuild after the COVID-19 crisis.

## ***Poverty and social protection***

An estimated 47 million more people will fall into extreme poverty by 2021, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the problems caused by the conflicts and hitting women and girls the hardest. Members stressed the importance of universal social protection and social dialogue. They called on the Commission to work with partner countries to develop strategies for economic recovery and job creation and to improve social security systems.

## ***Refugees and displaced persons***

The report stressed the importance of helping refugees and displaced persons to cope with the disproportionate socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, by further strengthening livelihoods and supporting income-generating activities, as well as their access to safety. It called on the EU and Member States to create the conditions for children and young people in refugee camps to have access to education, including distance learning opportunities, in particular basic learning activities.

### ***Strengthening the health sector***

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the persistent problem of global drug shortages, which has serious consequences in developing countries. The report emphasised that development assistance should focus on ensuring universal health care system coverage from a comprehensive and rights-based perspective. It called for a review of proposed or existing strategies and partnerships to strengthen and support public health systems in partner countries, including pandemic preparedness and the organisation and management of health systems.

Members stressed the need to address delays in national immunisation programmes as soon as possible and to ensure that the provision of other basic health services is resumed. They urged the EU and Member States to: (i) work towards equal and affordable access to universally available vaccines based on the principle of international solidarity and (ii) commit to making anti-pandemic vaccines and treatments a global public good, accessible to all.

### ***Human rights, governance and democracy***

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, many governments have used the emergency to justify placing restrictions on democratic processes and the civil space, including limiting humanitarian access, and to oppress minorities. The report highlighted the particularly severe consequences of COVID-19 lockdowns and the collateral damage that has been suffered by women, girls and children, in particular the rise in gender-based violence.

The Commission and Member States are invited to support parliaments in continuing to play an active role in scrutinising government measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and in assessing the human rights implications of public health measures. Efforts to better prevent and combat domestic violence should be intensified.

### ***Debt service and sound budgets***

Members called on the Commission and Member States to promote the full implementation of the G20 initiative to suspend debt servicing for the poorest countries. They urged the Commission to support international efforts in this regard, saying that the interest saved by the suspension should instead be invested in the health sector, which is often severely underfunded in developing countries.

The report also stressed the importance of addressing debt sustainability in partner countries as a priority. The Commission is called upon to take further steps to tackle the problems of illicit financial flows, tax evasion and tax fraud to improve the tax bases of developing countries.

### ***Education***

Members called for education to remain a spending priority in the EU's development policy and for the social and cultural function of schools to be given due consideration. They recommended that UNICEF's actions be supported and that Member States share their practices of maintaining education even in times of crisis. They called on the EU and its Member States to exploit the potential of distance learning.