

Italians and Development Cooperation

edited by the Political and Social Analysis Laboratory (LAPS)



ABSTRACT

This report, based on two focus groups held in December 2023, examines the Italians' opinion on development cooperation. Great attention is given to the issue of official development assistance (ODA), to the link between development cooperation and immigration and, finally, to the entities operating in this field, such as non-governmental organisations. This analysis is in continuity – both in terms of time and results – with the survey “Italians and Development Cooperation in 2023”, conducted by the Istituto Affari Internazionali in collaboration with the Political and Social Analysis Laboratory (LAPS) of the University of Siena.

Public opinion | Italy | Official development assistance | Migration | NGOs

keywords

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Introduction

Official development assistance (ODA) generally refers to public transfers made to a developing country – or to an international organisation operating in a developing country – with the aim of fostering its economic and social advancement.

Article 1, paragraph 1, of Law No. 125 of 11 August 2014,¹ titled “*Oggetto e finalità*” (“Objectives and Purposes”), states: “International cooperation for sustainable development, human rights and peace, hereafter referred to as ‘development cooperation’, is an integral and significant part of Italy’s foreign policy. It is inspired by the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. In accordance with the principle set out in Article 11 of the Italian Constitution, its action contributes to the promotion of peace and justice and aims to promote solidarity and equal relations between peoples, based on the principles of interdependence and partnership.” The same law outlines the objectives of development cooperation in paragraph 2 of Article 1 (letters a, b and c):

- to combat poverty by reducing existing inequalities, promoting sustainable development and improving the overall living conditions of the populations involved;
- to protect human rights by promoting full gender equality and equal opportunities within the framework of the rule of law and according to democratic principles;
- to prevent conflicts through the promotion of peacekeeping, peace-building processes and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

Analysing public opinion and citizens’ attitudes toward international cooperation provides valuable insights into the societal priorities and orientations on a topic of significant social relevance, albeit one that is generally underexplored from this perspective.

¹ Law No. 125 of 11 August 2014: *Disciplina generale sulla cooperazione internazionale per lo sviluppo*, <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2014;125>.

* Translation of “Gli italiani e la cooperazione allo sviluppo”. This report was written by Claudio Cozzi Fucile, Rossella Borri and Pierangelo Isernia.

A recent survey on Italians and international cooperation, conducted through a collaboration between the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Political and Social Analysis Laboratory (LAPS) of the University of Siena, revealed a limited level of knowledge on this subject. It also highlighted that, despite a general support toward development aid policies, Italians express low levels of trust in both the beneficiaries of such aid and the actors responsible for implementing these policies.

In order to deepen the understanding of these attitudes, the IAI, in collaboration with LAPS, conducted two focus groups on the topic of international cooperation, with particular attention to ODA. The two focus groups were held online on 14 and 15 December 2023, involving a total of 14 participants. The discussions followed a structured guide and were moderated by an experienced facilitator. The first group consisted of individuals with a high level of education, while the second group included participants with varying educational backgrounds.

Statistical sample features

14th December group was composed by:	15th December group was composed by:
4 men 3 women	3 men 4 women
2 under 30 4 over 30 1 does not declare his/her age	2 under 30 3 over 30 2 do not declare their age
2 married people 5 unmarried people	2 married people 5 unmarried people
1 with children 6 without children or without having declared any	1 with children 6 without children or without having declared any
1 university student 2 self-employed workers 3 employees 1 researcher	1 university student 1 self-employed worker 3 employees 2 unemployed people
2 people from the south 1 person from the north 2 people from the centre 2 people do not declare their origin	3 people from the south 2 people from the north 2 from the centre

1. Official development assistance: Knowledge, objectives and funding

The initial part of the discussion within the two focus groups examined the key concepts of official development assistance. Starting from a general definition of the topic and progressively narrowing down its scope, the participants' views were explored regarding the effectiveness of ODA, its relevance within the national context, the reasons behind the implementation of aid and the related costs borne by public finances.

Concerning the financial aspect, the issue of ODA was subsequently assessed from a comparative perspective, both in relation to other items in the national budget and in terms of the amount allocated to aid by other European Union countries and the United Kingdom.

1.1 ODA: What it is and how much it is known

At the beginning of the focus groups, before receiving a detailed presentation of the topics from the moderator, participants initially struggled to accurately identify the area of discussion and the specific theme of ODA.

"It makes me think of socially useful work."

"To prevent Italy from falling into a Third World country."

"For me, it definitely refers to all public initiatives aimed at... helping businesses... or families, but in this case, businesses, to develop their systems or improve their production processes and business strategies."

This initial lack of knowledge on the topic provided an opportunity to explore the participants' pre-existing understanding and to build a shared foundation for the subsequent discussion. To clarify the scope of the conversation and guide participants toward the focus group's subject, the moderator provided some context and offered the following definition of ODA:

"Official development assistance refers to financial resources provided by high-income countries to support projects and initiatives aimed at combating poverty and inequality in low-income countries – the so-called developing countries. What are your thoughts? Impressions?"

As the discussion progressed, participants' views on ODA took shape around four main orientations: a) instrumental, b) altruistic, c) conspiratorial and d) selfish.

a) *Instrumental*. Some participants perceived ODA and development cooperation in general as a purely instrumental tool, a lever to secure future benefits, whether specific or vague. According to this view, the resources in developing countries (LDCs) are seen as opportunities to be exploited, and aid is perceived as an investment that should yield economic or political returns for the donor nation.

"It looks positive on the surface... but the term [someone] used earlier, 'exploit', is something to really consider. I think no one gives without

expecting something in return. [...] If a state allocates millions of euros without getting anything in return, it seems very strange to me.”

“There are many resources in Africa, like mineral resources, that the rest of the world could exploit, giving these countries a way to use and commercialise them. They could enter a better economic cycle, benefiting the whole world.”

“Another important thing to keep in mind – which I firmly believe – is that we can also gain returns... because, in the end, everything comes back. These funds help these countries, but usually, there is always some degree of gratitude. It’s clear that Italy and other Western countries capable of providing aid will receive some reciprocal economic advantages in return.”

b) *Altruistic*. Participants adhering to this view believed that providing aid is a moral duty, regardless of specific reasons or potential benefits. They emphasised topics such as equality and human solidarity, arguing that everyone has the right to live a decent life.

“Helping is the right thing to do. We are all brothers, and we were lucky to be born on the ‘right side’ of the world. It’s right to give others the chance to live as we do. We often take many things for granted, but there are definitely people who have it worse.”

“As a general principle, I completely agree... on the idea that those who have more should help those who have less. I would apply this principle at every level – personally and at the state level. So, I strongly support this type of policy.”

“I’m very much in favour of ODA. I believe that by providing targeted aid to governments – especially those that guarantee human rights in return – we can facilitate the economic, social and human development of these nations.”

c) *Conspiratorial*. This group of participants expressed skepticism toward ODA, primarily due to concerns about the recipients’ ability to manage the funds effectively and fears of corruption or favouritism in the allocation of aid.

“If it were up to me, I would want to see the accounts and understand if we have the means to provide aid to these countries... the Balkans... Argentina, etc.”

“We also need to make sure that the funds are actually used to help these countries and not handed out to someone’s friend.”

“The only thing is that I would like there to be greater oversight on how the funds are actually used for the development of these countries. Not so much about our own shadow areas... but to understand how the money is spent and whether it is used effectively.”

d) *Selfish*. Some participants questioned whether it was appropriate for Italy to provide aid to other countries. Their reasoning was primarily based on the country’s limited economic and financial resources, which, they argued, should be prioritised for addressing domestic issues and improving the well-being of Italian citizens.

"It's humanitarian and financial aid. It looks good on paper, but I'm sceptical because it's hard to help someone else when you're not capable of helping yourself."

"I don't think Italy is capable [of providing aid]... For this reason, I was thinking about aid that we should be receiving, not giving."

"When you mentioned this topic, I thought the aid was for us! We have so many gaps that aren't being addressed, unfortunately."

"As someone mentioned earlier, when billions are allocated and there are many difficulties at home, people are not very supportive of it."

"We always think about doing good... helping other countries, but we rarely stop to think about our own situation in Italy. [...] We can't say that our infrastructure and organisations always work perfectly. So, I agree with helping these countries. I agree with supporting their development, but we also need to think about the situation we live in."

"I agree with the idea that there are many problems in Italy as well. Just think of the South and the central regions – there are significant issues with infrastructure, and funds should be allocated there too, not just to developing countries."

1.2 The objectives of ODA: Balancing humanitarian, economic and national interests

Participants identified three primary motivations behind ODA: humanitarian purposes, economic goals and national interests. Humanitarian reasons were the most frequently cited, followed by economic considerations and, lastly, national self-interest.

a) *Humanitarian motivations.* Participants highlighted fundamental human rights – such as access to food, water and healthcare – as the primary drivers of ODA, with a particular focus on the needs of children.

"Essential aid where the basics are lacking. Like... food, healthcare, education. You need to go into these communities and try to create a liveable society. Children need a school to learn, and people need hospitals to receive medical care. Start by building the basics and then move on to less urgent needs."

"For me, two things are crucial: healthcare and ensuring basic human services to guarantee survival. In 2023, children should not be dying of hunger. That might have been acceptable centuries ago, but with the knowledge we have today, it's not."

"Basic services like hospitals and access to food are indispensable. It's unacceptable that after the year 2000, some places still lack these. And access to water – you often hear about water scarcity in those countries, while here we can turn on the tap and get as much as we want. There's something wrong with that!"

In addition to basic survival needs, participants emphasised the importance of education and infrastructure development. Schools were viewed as essential tools

for breaking the cycle of poverty and giving people the opportunity to build a better future.

“In my opinion, the priority should be to expand schools and hospitals. These are basic necessities.”

“Then there should be infrastructure to ensure things like potable water and other essentials. And without education, you can’t move forward. It’s necessary to guarantee at least a basic level of education.”

Participants stressed the interconnection between education and economic development, arguing that literacy and basic education are essential prerequisites for both individual and collective progress. Education was viewed not only as a cultural or social good but as a means to achieve economic independence and self-sufficiency.

“We need to focus on culture, education and employment so that the state can gradually generate its own GDP and become self-sufficient.”

“They need the tools to study and become what we’ve become. It’s about giving them the means.”

b) *Economic motivations.* Participants recognised the importance of fostering economic self-sufficiency in developing countries (LDCs) to reduce their dependence on Western aid.

“The second goal should be to finance activities, services and jobs that enable these developing countries to self-finance. Relying on continuous donations creates a vicious cycle. Instead, we need to make them operational and help them progress from developing to moderately developed and eventually fully developed countries.”

“The aim should be to create a future for them in their own land, so they don’t have to leave. We need to develop their resources and potential.”

This perspective suggests that ODA should focus on capacity building and economic empowerment, ensuring that recipient countries can eventually become self-reliant rather than perpetually dependent on external aid.

c) *National interest motivations.* As previously observed, some participants interpreted ODA through a national interest lens, seeing aid as a tool for securing future economic or political advantages for donor countries. These participants viewed aid as part of a broader geopolitical strategy.

“I take a more cynical view. If we provide this humanitarian and financial assistance now, we can expect to cash in a favour later. It’s natural to expect some economic return, even for industrial production. These countries have resources that are essential for the development of the West. There’s an economic and political game at play!”

This group of participants emphasised that ODA often serves strategic purposes, where donor countries aim to secure access to resources, markets, or political influence in recipient countries. In this view, aid is seen as an investment that should yield tangible benefits for the donor country:

“It looks good on paper, but let’s be realistic – no country gives without expecting something in return.”

1.3 Funding ODA: The return of observed polarisations

When discussing Italy’s financial contributions to ODA, participants demonstrated a lack of knowledge regarding both the total amount allocated and how it is distributed across different expenditure categories.

To facilitate a more informed discussion, the moderator provided participants with detailed data on Italy’s ODA spending in 2022, including a comparison with national defence spending and the ODA budgets of other European Union countries (France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands) and the United Kingdom. Despite this additional context, participants remained divided in their opinions regarding the adequacy of resources currently allocated to ODA and whether future increases were justifiable.

Interestingly, some of the initial orientations expressed earlier in the discussion resurfaced during this phase. When informed about the proposal to raise ODA funding to 0.7 per cent of Italy’s GDP, participants expressed doubts about the country’s capacity to meet this target. As seen previously, some voiced a “conspiratorial” view, suggesting that such financial commitments might be imposed by external entities:

“If we haven’t reached the 0.7 per cent target so far, it doesn’t mean we’ll get there easily. If the funds are available and intended for that purpose, that’s fine. But if it’s imposed... maybe from above, requiring everyone to hit the same figure... it could be European pressure.”

“I agree with [xxx]. If we’re required to reach 0.7 per cent, how much will it actually cost us? We’re already struggling at 0.3 per cent... How can we get to 0.7 per cent?”

In line with the “selfish” perspective observed earlier, several participants reiterated the need for better domestic resource allocation, both in terms of ODA and defence spending. According to these participants, Italy should prioritise addressing its own internal challenges:

“And then we see that we need to allocate perhaps 12 billion for development aid. We keep coming back to the same point raised by [xxx]: it’s fair to provide aid, but we should first consider the situation here [in Italy].”

“In my opinion, true defence spending should be directed toward helping those in need, both in Italy and elsewhere. Education should be strengthened in Italy – because, for instance, Italy has fewer university graduates than the rest of Western Europe. So, real defence spending should be about constructive and meaningful assistance.”

“And I’d like to remind everyone that Italy is, among Western countries, the one with the greatest internal disparities between the north and the south. So yes, I want to support aid efforts and help everyone. But I think we should start by solving our own problems first.”

Finally, some participants adopted an “opportunistic” stance, viewing ODA funding as a potential avenue for Italy to gain economic advantages through indirect returns.

“Taking into account what others said: when countries offer aid to those in need... as [xxx] pointed out, there are ways to benefit indirectly. You can make trade agreements... In some way, you give, but you can also aim to get something in return by doing business in those countries! You go to Africa, build roads, create jobs, and still make money in other ways. You could think of it that way.”

This instrumental approach sees ODA as an investment that, if managed strategically, can generate long-term benefits for the donor country, such as economic partnerships, market access and geopolitical influence.

1.4 ODA funding: Comparing defence spending and international contributions

Participants’ reactions to comparative data on ODA spending were mixed, particularly when comparing it to Italy’s defence budget. While opinions varied regarding defence spending, there was greater consensus when comparing Italy’s ODA contributions to those of other European countries.

The comparison between ODA and defence spending sparked polarised opinions. Some participants supported defence spending, especially in light of recent international events, and did not see reducing it in favour of ODA as a viable option:

“Right now, it’s important to support defence. I don’t see the amount as a balancing factor. It’s not like you can take money from defence and shift it to humanitarian aid. In today’s world, that’s not a good choice.”

“In terms of figures, I think we’re about right. The amount allocated to ODA doesn’t seem too low compared to what’s spent on defence.”

Others, however, strongly opposed the high level of defence spending:

“Spending 31 billion – not million, but 31 billion – a year on defence is an astronomical figure. Unless we plan to go to war every year to justify those expenses... It’s necessary to have an internal defence system, but defence spending should be limited, and defence always seems to benefit from huge advantages.”

“I think the defence budget is disproportionately high compared to what we allocate for aid.”

“The absolute numbers are scary, especially when you compare the aid we give to developing countries with what we spend on defence. A more thoughtful distribution of resources is needed. We should start by cutting defence spending, which is often tied to alliances or agreements that aren’t always clear or transparent.”

Participants showed more convergence of opinions when comparing Italy’s ODA spending to that of other EU countries and the UK. There was general agreement

that wealthier countries, such as Germany and France, allocate more funds to ODA because their economies are stronger:

“In proportion to their economies, it makes sense. Germany and France are definitely stronger and more stable compared to other countries.”

“The comparison between countries is interesting, but it should also account for per capita income. For instance, Germany spends more, but they also have a much higher per capita income.”

“Compared to other countries, as [xxx] rightly said, their GDP is higher, so they can afford to allocate a larger amount to developing countries.”

Despite initial scepticism about development aid policies, when asked whether Italy should maintain, increase, or reduce its ODA spending, both focus groups expressed general support for maintaining the current level of funding:

“We’re happy to help! But only as long as we’re able to.”

“I think it’s right to provide aid and allocate a good percentage to it. But you need to assess all the expenses and see what they depend on.”

“I wouldn’t be in favour of reducing our percentage. On the contrary, I think increasing it would be positive because there are repercussions. However, countries with higher incomes can allocate not just larger absolute amounts, but also higher percentages. We also have high expenses for managing migration, unlike other nations that don’t face the same challenges because they aren’t on the Mediterranean.”

In response to participants’ scepticism, the moderator introduced another point: Italy’s membership in the G7, making it one of the world’s seven wealthiest countries. However, this did little to change participants’ views, as they pointed to internal inequalities in wealth distribution within Italy.

“Saying that we’re one of the richest countries... If that wealth is poorly distributed, both internally and externally, we risk economic collapse.”

“If you lived in different realities, you’d discover new things. But people look at their own surroundings and focus on their own problems... You think about yourself. The discussion naturally becomes self-centred.”

This final remark underscores the “selfish” orientation observed earlier, with participants prioritising domestic needs over international aid. Even when acknowledging Italy’s global standing, participants returned to concerns about internal economic struggles and the perception that Italy should first resolve its own issues before providing aid to others.

2. The migration-development cooperation nexus

In the second part of the discussion, participants were asked to reflect on the possible link between ODA, cooperation mechanisms and migration flows. They were invited to express their views on the existence of such a connection and its potential implications. Based on these considerations, participants were then asked to reassess whether the level of ODA funding in Italy is appropriate.

2.1 Development cooperation as a tool to reduce migration flows: Between doubts and certainties

Regarding the potential link between migration flows, cooperation policies and ODA, participants' opinions can be grouped into two main positions: sceptics – who doubt the effectiveness of the relationship – and supporters – who believe in the validity and efficacy of the relationship.

Within these two positions, additional arguments emerged. Among sceptics, some questioned the effectiveness of aid in limiting migration flows, while others doubted the existence of any connection between ODA and migration. Among supporters, there were also "opportunistic" motivations, suggesting that development aid could be used to achieve other strategic goals.

2.2 Doubts about the effectiveness and existence of the ODA-migration link

The majority of participants agreed on the existence of a relationship between ODA and migration flows. However, they were divided on the effectiveness of this relationship, with many expressing doubts:

"I see the connection... It could be about the Italian government making agreements with nearby countries like Algeria or Tunisia, providing economic aid that should, in theory, reduce migration flows. In theory. But I don't know, because migration still happens. For me, that's the link."

"I think these policies are aimed at reducing migration flows. But whether they actually succeed is another matter. It's noble to make agreements with governments in countries from which many migrants come, but the other side also needs to take strong actions to combat illegal immigration."

"In my view, the goal is to reduce migration flows. They're trying to figure out whether it's more cost-effective to finance these funds than to bear the costs of migrants arriving."

"In theory, what [xxx] and [xxx] said makes sense. It's a good idea in theory, but helping people there to stop them from coming here is just the tip of the iceberg."

Participants who were more critical of ODA policies aimed at reducing migration flows argued that economic aid alone is insufficient to address the root causes of migration, such as war and political instability:

"In my opinion, providing only financial support to individuals won't be very effective in preventing them from migrating. They flee due to wars and other issues. More political intervention is needed, though financial support can still help."

Participants who were most sceptical about the link between ODA and migration flows pointed to wars and Western economic interests as the primary drivers of migration. According to them, conflicts in developing countries and the exploitation of natural resources by Western countries are the real causes of

migration. Consequently, humanitarian aid policies would have little to no impact on reducing migration flows:

"It's easy to say, 'Let's help them in their own countries.' But they're at war! How do you help them by providing food and water? What about the fact that they're being killed? They're being killed at any moment!"

"The problem is that it's us Westerners – those with economic power – who create these war situations."

"It's not just about providing aid; we also need to prevent Western countries from using developing countries as battlegrounds for their interests."

"We often think migrants leave to look for better opportunities. But they're fleeing war... Among the people who need help are those seeking refuge from conflict."

This critical perspective views migration as a consequence of deeper geopolitical and economic dynamics. Participants argued that ODA policies cannot address these root causes unless there is a broader political effort to reduce conflicts and prevent Western exploitation of developing countries.

2.3 Certainties and opportunism: The migration-ODA link

Among participants, only one individual expressed a clear belief in the value of ODA as an effective tool to control migration flows for humanitarian and ethical reasons:

"The goal is to help those who want to migrate stay in their homeland. By helping them, we can avoid migration flows. Overall, it's definitely a positive thing. You go there, do what's needed to improve living conditions, and people won't seek fortune elsewhere but will invest in their own land. From my perspective, this is a clearly positive outcome."

Most participants, however, expressed opportunistic views about the link between ODA and migration. These views were driven by two main motivations: economic interests and will to reduce migration flows.

Some participants highlighted the economic benefits of ODA policies, such as investment opportunities in developing countries (LDCs), the potential to secure both skilled and unskilled labour, and the positive impact on Italy's pension system due to an influx of new workers to address the country's declining birth rate:

"All these various supports provided – I don't think they're given for free. I believe Italy expects something in return. I've heard that banks even recommend investing in these developing countries."

"From an economic point of view, it's an advantage."

"We can't regularise everyone who comes in. But by 2050, Italy will need around 300,000 workers. So, we need to balance things out – we prevent excessive migration while retaining enough to meet our needs."

"This approach would create a selective flow of migrants. By improving living conditions in these countries, the people who come to Italy will do so because they're seeking work – and we'll need them."

Another group of participants viewed ODA as a valid tool to reduce migration flows by improving living conditions in LDCs. The idea was that if people have better prospects in their own countries, they would be less likely to migrate to Italy or Europe:

"The goal is to foster development in these countries to prevent people from migrating, especially to Italy, due to their limited resources and opportunities. By creating better conditions in their home countries, we could reduce migration flows. People leave because they can't live comfortably where they are."

"I think this is the only explanation! Developing these countries because we've reached a point where there are too many immigrants. Take Salvini, for example."

"We benefit from reduced migration issues, and they benefit from having better development opportunities at home."

The debate on whether the migration-ODA link could justify increasing ODA funding generated mixed reactions. While some participants saw this as a valid justification for more resources, others remained sceptical, pointing out that migration flows have not decreased despite existing ODA policies:

"I haven't noticed any reduction in migration flows over the years."

Participants were divided into two camps. On one side, supporters of increasing ODA funding as a way to control migration:

"We'll have to spend the money! (laughs) It's in our best interest!"

On the other one, sceptics who questioned the effectiveness of ODA policies and opposed increasing funds:

"I'm against increasing spending! Let's look at the facts: despite the funds allocated, migration flows haven't decreased but increased. So why increase the spending? It's a matter of facts."

"Unless we address the root cause – Western exploitation of developing countries – we could fund everything, even give 100 per cent, and the problem wouldn't be solved. People need to live in a place where they feel safe. If you have food but don't feel safe, you'll still flee!"

The most widely shared opinion was scepticism about the effectiveness of ODA policies, even if participants recognised the link between cooperation and migration. Most participants were reluctant to support a significant increase in ODA funding, especially given the uncertainty about long-term benefits for Italy's pension and welfare systems:

"I still stick to my opinion. There's no point in increasing funds. Even if it looks economically sustainable now, will the balance remain positive in the future if we raise the fund? These people are often underpaid, so the taxes and contributions they pay... would the balance still be positive?"

This critical stance highlights ongoing doubts about the practicality and sustainability of ODA as a long-term solution to migration challenges.

3. The actors of development cooperation

In connection with the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of ODA mechanisms, an investigation was carried out regarding the responsible actors and those involved in cooperation and ODA policies. Participants were asked to express their views on the role of civil society organisations, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in the context of development aid and to assess whether these actors' actions are generally effective.

3.1 *Who helps whom? The role of NGOs and other socio-institutional actors in cooperation*

When asked to identify the socio-institutional actors active in international cooperation and ODA, participants in both focus groups named the following organisations: FAO, United Nations (UN) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Additional organisations were mentioned in one group but not the other: UNICEF, Red Cross, Political parties, Multinational companies, Amnesty International and Comunità di Sant'Egidio.

In exploring participants' level of trust in these socio-institutional actors, as well as those previously identified during the discussion, most participants expressed little to no trust in these organisations. Those who did express trust often cited direct experiences with such organisations as a basis for their confidence.

3.2 *Generalised distrust toward social actors and NGOs*

The reasons for distrust are articulated around four main points:

1) *Lack of tangible results.* Many participants highlighted the lack of concrete outcomes from the actions of NGOs and social actors:

"I don't know about these associations. They always seem to start with a very... utopian idea! [...] I've never seen any tangible evidence of what they've done. So, since I've never seen it, for me their contribution is zero."

"[...] And above all, I'd like to know if it's real. They don't give you feedback on whether they've actually invested the money you donated – or that others donated."

2) *Lack of transparency in fund and donation management.* Participants also expressed concerns about how funds and donations are managed:

"The organisations I've encountered didn't give me much confidence. The problem with all these situations is that they're good at fundraising, but often the donor, especially small donors or ordinary citizens, never knows how those funds are actually used."

"In my opinion, people expect to get feedback, to know that their money was used efficiently for something that makes a difference. Instead, they start with big, wonderful projects, and in the end? You don't hear anything

about them. You don't know where the money went, or if it was used, or if the project was completed."

3) *Excessively high management costs.* A major source of dissatisfaction was the high administrative costs associated with NGOs:

"I've always wondered: if I donate money, I expect 100 per cent to go to those in need. But we're lucky if half of it actually gets there. How is it possible that you raise 100 per cent, and 50 per cent goes to management costs? That's unacceptable. Management costs shouldn't come out of donations. Otherwise, it's not a donation or aid for developing countries anymore."

"I've had dealings with some of these organisations and unfortunately, I noticed that management costs often exceed all other expenses. [...] That undermines the solidarity principle that should be the foundation of these initiatives."

4) *Overly utopian projects.* Participants also criticised NGOs for pursuing projects that seemed too idealistic or unrealistic:

"I agree with [xxx]. They seem to have very utopian projects."

"It's this utopian idea that makes you lose faith. They tell you all these wonderful things, but then reality sets in, and it becomes something much less achievable. That's why, yes, I donate when I can, but... honestly, I often have doubts about it."

3.3 *Selective trust in social actors and NGOs*

In general, there are many doubts regarding the real effectiveness and correctness of these entities, as well as regarding the staff and the management dynamics employed by the same entities:

"I am quite sceptical. I am convinced that some of them actually provide concrete help. But for others, I don't know, I'm sceptical."

"The members of these organisations don't do only that job! Either they are already well-off and dedicate their lives to this... [or] they do other things in life as well."

It is particularly interesting to observe how, on the opposite side – that of trust – there are specific selection logics. In fact, it is possible to observe selective trust, mainly based on direct experience and directed toward specific, well-identified organisations, which allows participants to overcome initial doubts:

"I have donated the 5x1000 from my tax declaration to UNICEF for several years. I don't know if they are all volunteer-based, but it's also fair that some of them get paid. The important thing is that the goal is achieved. [...] I trust some and others less. [...] I don't like Médecins Sans Frontières very much because I saw how they work... I had an experience years ago and wasn't satisfied."

"I personally support Médecins Sans Frontières, so I periodically receive their financial reports. They send reports on what has been done, and I see that, yes, unfortunately, there are management costs, also because they are

international organisations, etc., but I also see that something concrete is being done.”

“Some associations [...] seem a bit self-serving, while others manage to achieve some goals.”

3.4 How trust changes with institutional actors

When the moderator introduces information to correctly identify the institutional actors involved in the cooperation sector (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Ministry of Economy and Finance, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, Ministry of Environment and Energy Transition and Ministry of the Interior), the attitude and opinions of participants change in a specific direction.

On the one hand, there is an increase in trust toward the cooperation system, knowing that the State is involved. On the other hand, participants express greater requests for clarity and transparency, especially regarding financial and economic management, and hypothesise possible cases of corruption:

“On the institutional side, it reassures me, but then the choices are different. The institutional base gives more certainty.”

“Like [xxx] said. Since the State is involved, it provides certainty and security that this money and aid will be used well. Who better than the State? [...] Although each State might have its own interests, so it’s hard to know if all this aid goes in the same direction or not.”

“It may be that all these NGOs – of which I have a terrible opinion and still do – may actually do a lot of good that I’m unaware of! The problem is the lack of information.”

“But with the Italian involvement, they gain bribes, and then that highway is now covered in sand because no one, let’s say, checks.”

“[...] growing distrust toward local, national, and even international institutions, due to the many scandals we’ve witnessed, clearly does not favour this kind of relationship with these institutions. [...] The difficulty in understanding how this money is spent significantly affects this matter. Therefore, greater communication and the possibility to monitor would be very useful to strengthen our trust in these institutions and their operations.”

The need for greater clarity is further highlighted by the participants’ initial surprise at discovering new prerogatives within state apparatuses:

“I wouldn’t have expected it! I wouldn’t have expected a strategy to fund developing countries from the Digital Transition Agency [...] But I wouldn’t have expected it from that agency.”

“I had never even heard about [development cooperation funding], so I wasn’t aware of its existence, nor that money was being allocated for it. Now that I have a better idea, I wonder why they don’t promote it more – at the State or government level. If there are such initiatives, Italian citizens should know about them since it’s our money being used!”

4. The participants

In the final part of the discussion, information concerning the participants themselves was gathered. Specifically, they were asked to share whether they engaged in volunteering activities, their opinions on the matter, and the level of trust they had toward volunteer organisations. Participants were also asked where they obtained information about development cooperation and their perception of the topic.

4.1 *What do they do? Volunteering and activism on development cooperation*

Among the sample examined, only two out of 14 participants reported being involved in volunteering activities, while most either did not respond or mentioned having volunteered in the past:

“I have seen... I have done volunteering, no, for... But also because when I was younger, I lived in Fano and there’s much less there.”

“When I was younger, I mean really younger, I did civil service and years of after-school activities.”

Some participants suggested that volunteering opportunities may differ between those living in the South and those in the North, citing this difference as a possible explanation for the low involvement in volunteering:

“In the North, there’s much more of this idea of volunteering, of helping others. Where I lived, the only volunteering I heard about was food collection for charity. Otherwise, I didn’t hear anything.”

“Indeed, here in the North, it’s different. Where I used to live – a small town – the only thing organised was food collection for the needy, but only during the holidays.”

When exploring the reasons for the low level of personal involvement in activities aimed at reducing global poverty and inequality, participants divided into two groups: those citing exogenous reasons unrelated to the organisations (such as time, health, or entry barriers) and those citing endogenous reasons related to the organisations themselves (such as low trust or poor communication strategies).

Participants identified the following exogeneous obstacles to their involvement in volunteering:

a) Health issues:

“I was blocked by Covid. [...] Then I didn’t try again because of health reasons. These, like other diseases, continue to exist, just like they have them. So, the idea fell apart.”

b) Lack of time due to personal or professional life:

“It’s not really a selfish thing... I’m busy on so many fronts, and when it comes to charity, I’m definitely the first to help. But honestly, I’ve never

thought about getting involved personally. [...] I've got a lot going on... It may sound trivial, but right now, I've got so much going on."
"[...] I've also been abroad a lot for work lately."

c) Bureaucratic barriers:

"In Romagna, there was the flood and people wanted to go help [...]. But there was a long list of forms to fill out, authorisations [...]. If I also have to fill out all these forms, get authorisations [...] it makes you lose the desire to help."

Participants also pointed to endogenous factors within volunteer organisations that discouraged involvement:

a) Low trust in volunteer organisations:

"I haven't fully embraced this mindset yet. I don't know why, but sometimes it feels a bit distant. [...] When I've approached these associations, what I've seen behind the scenes hasn't always pleased me. [...] Something doesn't sit right with me."

b) Poor communication strategies:

"They don't promote it enough, I think. Maybe if it were better advertised..."
"It's not that I don't want to help, but it feels distant at a communication level."

4.2 Where do they get their information and what is their perception of the topic?

Participants were asked to identify their sources of information on development cooperation and comment on the communication strategies used by NGOs. In this phase, differences between the two focus groups clearly emerged, particularly regarding the information channels they considered valid and the judgment they gave on communication tools used by NGOs.

Participants in the first focus group, composed of individuals with a high level of education, reported using newspapers, specialised magazines and NGO websites as their primary information sources:

"L'Antidiplomatico, La Fionda [...] then Altreconomia, Le Monde Diplomatique and Internazionale. [...] Also, the websites of newspapers."

"[...] always newspapers [...] news I see, for example, on Google News, which is an aggregator. [...] I also like to check NGO websites from time to time to see what they're doing – Médecins Sans Frontières, for example."

"I read Internazionale, for example, which sometimes has articles on these topics. The magazine, the periodical."

Participants in the second focus group, composed of individuals with different levels of education, said they mainly got their information from television news and in emergency situations:

"[...] I don't say every day on the news when they give the war bulletin about how many people arrive in Lampedusa... but they don't provide specific news."

Regarding perceptions of NGO communication strategies, participants in the two focus groups diverged in their opinions.

The first group recognised the effectiveness of strong imagery in NGO advertisements but expressed reluctance to accept its use:

"I can't watch them. [...] I understand that these ads aim to touch people's hearts, but they're too strong! [...] I skip them; I can't watch them. So, I understand that these images are powerful, and maybe they're needed. But for me, they're too intense."

"I agree too. [...] These images are really too strong, even for me. [...] They show the reality of the situation, but maybe they could adjust the communication style a bit. [...] At least, they could avoid making people feel too guilty for not donating."

"It's clear that these ads are very strong, and I sometimes watch them in shock. [...] But I also think they're effective because we live in a world where everyone thinks only about themselves. [...] Probably, if they didn't use these tactics, they wouldn't reach their goal. [...] It's not a nice method, but I understand it, and I even justify it."

The second group, on the other hand, fully acknowledged the effectiveness of strong images and believed it was appropriate to use them. However, they also suggested showing positive outcomes of donations:

"They show what many people don't know because they don't approach that world. [...] I remember them, and I think they're effective."

"One stuck with me. I remember an ad with a child who needed care, but I don't remember who it was from. [...] It opens your eyes."

"I'd say it's right to show them because they display the reality. But [...] abroad [...] they don't push you into despair or show only tragedy. They also show positive outcomes. [...] It's as if there's no progress being made."

Some participants expressed doubts about the truthfulness of certain images shown in NGO campaigns and questioned their effectiveness:

"I generally don't like these ads because [...] you never know what's behind them. For example, the Catholic Church advertises the 8x1000 donation a lot. [...] But I read in the newspapers that the percentage actually reaching the poor is not that high. [...] So, in general, I don't trust ads because I think they may not be truthful."

"Every year, you tell me there's war, death, disease and all that. [...] And then you think, 'I've donated now, but will it be the same next year?' You don't get a clear sense of what happens with the 8x1000 you give."

Conclusions

The objective of this research is to analyse the opinions and attitudes of Italian citizens regarding international cooperation. The research is structured around six main themes: the objectives and functioning of ODA; the funding of the cooperation system in Italy; the connection between migration flows and international cooperation processes; the actors of cooperation and the trust in NGOs; the characteristics of participants, including their predisposition toward volunteering; the evaluation of communication tools used by NGOs.

The objectives and functioning of ODA

Concerning the first two themes, participants seem to adopt attitude patterns that can be summarised into four different orientations: "instrumental," "altruistic," "conspiratorial," and "selfish".

Regarding the functioning of ODA, participants from the two focus groups highlighted that among the foundational reasons for international cooperation, actions related to the safeguarding of fundamental human rights prevail. These dynamics, intentions and values can be placed within the complex framework of humanitarian goals: ensuring access to water, food, basic healthcare services and child protection systems.

Within this framework, schools and training systems assume a key role, becoming mechanisms of socioeconomic promotion and employment pathways, which are fundamental prerequisites for individual and collective development. In the context of the economic reasons underpinning international cooperation, participants place particular emphasis on the goal of self-sufficiency. The self-sufficiency dynamic is conceived with a clear direction: the autonomy of Developing countries from Western nations.

In this case, international cooperation abandons its initial humanitarian disposition and the ethical vision associated with it, replacing these with regulatory dimensions aimed at a lower use of economic and social resources by Western countries toward developing countries.

Finally, participants observed that among the objectives of ODA functioning, there may also be purely opportunistic reasons, meaning instrumental goals pursued by virtue of an undefined national interest.

The funding of the cooperation system in Italy

Regarding the funding of the cooperation system in Italy, participants do not seem to demonstrate great knowledge. When asked to express their opinions on the data provided by the moderator, concerning the ODA contributions for 2022, the funding planned for the Defence sector in the same year and the economic

allocations of other EU countries and the UK, participants maintained doubts and scepticism; differing opinions alternated throughout the discussion.

When introducing the planned possibility of increasing ODA funding to 0.7 per cent of GDP, participants seem to express doubts about the real financial capacity of the Italian State to support such an economic commitment.

Once again, typical behavioural patterns and opinions, already observed previously, returned during the discussion. These can be described as either: “selfish” – aimed at a better internal distribution of resources allocated to ODA and the Defence sector – or “opportunistic” – characterising the opinions of those who identify economic advantages for their own country in ODA funding.

Recent international events, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, appear to serve as internal justifications for the higher funding of the Defence sector compared to ODA.

At the same time, participants do not always share the same opinion when comparing Italian funding with that of other countries (EU and non-EU). The wealth and prosperity of these states are seen as an explanation for their higher ODA funding levels.

In conclusion, the current spending level planned for ODA is considered generally consistent and fair, and there is no perceived need for a significant increase in funding. There is no particular scepticism regarding the higher funding of the Defence sector, nor regarding comparisons with other European countries.

The connection between migration flows and international cooperation processes

Despite initial scepticism about the effectiveness of cooperation policies and ODA in reducing migration flows to Italy and Europe, participants seem convinced of the existence of a relationship between the two elements. Nevertheless, most participants do not support increasing ODA funding for this purpose.

The majority of participants recognise that coherent and well-implemented ODA policies could indeed reduce migration flows, regardless of the underlying motives for these policies: whether ethical or humanitarian reasons (such as protecting migrants themselves), self-serving or utilitarian motives (such as funding the Italian pension system), economic interests, or individualistic ones (such as investment opportunities in developing countries). Only a few participants, and only in certain cases, believe that this conviction could justify gradually increasing ODA funding. The most widely shared opinion remains that of scepticism toward such a funding increase.

In this context, the voices of those who argue that the underlying causes of migration flows differ from commonly recognised explanations also emerge.

According to these participants, the existing conflicts and Western countries' interests in the natural resources of developing countries are the primary causes of migration flows. As a result, they believe that international cooperation policies, especially when interpreted as humanitarian aid, are largely ineffective or even superfluous.

In conclusion, most participants appear unwilling to change their opinion when faced with the prospect of increasing ODA funding. This remains true even considering the potential benefits to the Italian pension system, as suggested in one of the two focus groups.

The actors of cooperation and trust in NGOs

Overall, there is a generally low level of trust toward socio-institutional actors involved in international cooperation. The distrust recorded is not limited to the actors themselves but also extends to the practices they implement and their effectiveness.

The reasons for distrust can be summarised into four aspects: the lack of concrete results from the actors involved in cooperation; the lack of transparency in the management of financial resources and private donations; the high management costs of these organisations; the limited tangibility of the projects carried out by these organisations.

The few participants who express trust in the role of these organisations and the effectiveness of their actions often cite direct experiences as the basis for their confidence. This trust, therefore, takes on a selective character.

While distrust is generally widespread and predetermined, trust – for those who express it – is selective, directed toward a limited set of organisations and based on personal experience. When new information about the institutional actors involved is introduced into the discussion, two effects are generally observed: trust in the cooperation system increases, likewise, demands for transparency and clarity in the management of financial resources also increase.

The characteristics of participants: Predisposition to volunteering and evaluation of NGOs' communication tools

The majority of participants do not engage in volunteering activities. The main reasons for this lack of involvement can be divided into two categories: exogenous factors unrelated to volunteer organisations and endogenous factors concerning the organisations themselves. Among the exogenous factors, participants mentioned: lack of time due to personal or professional commitments; the presence of bureaucratic obstacles that complicate access; health-related reasons.

Among the endogenous factors, participants clearly expressed a general lack of trust in the work of volunteer organisations – as already highlighted in the

conclusions of the previous section – as well as unrewarding communication strategies that would influence and discourage their involvement in volunteering activities.

Regarding the topic of information sources and their effectiveness, participants showed a significant division within the two focus groups. Participants with a higher level of education reported informing themselves mainly through NGO websites and specialised magazines.

In contrast, participants with different levels of education stated that they mainly relied on television news and almost exclusively during humanitarian emergencies.

At the same time, participants in the first group were more reluctant to accept the dissemination of strong images, although they understood their communicative power. Conversely, participants in the second group fully acknowledged the effectiveness of such images and tended to approve their dissemination.

Participants in both focus groups initially appeared unfamiliar with the topics covered in the analysis. Their attitudes can be generally summarised into four different behavioural patterns: instrumental, selfish, conspiratorial and altruistic.

Once essential information elements were introduced, all participants – or almost all – seemed to recognise the importance of the topic, both for economic and ethical reasons, including humanitarian, utilitarian, or national interest considerations. However, the majority of participants expressed opposition to increasing resources allocated to international cooperation policies and ODA, despite acknowledging a relationship – albeit criticised – between migration flows and cooperation policies.

Participants also demonstrated limited trust toward social actors involved in cooperation. Among those who admitted to trusting certain actors, selective trust dynamics were observed. The presence of institutional structures was seen as reinforcing trust in cooperation dynamics, but at the same time it increased concerns about potential grey areas, particularly regarding economic and financial issues. The lack of trust in the organisations involved also impacts participants' willingness to engage in active volunteering.

Finally, significant differences were observed between the two focus groups regarding the effectiveness of communication strategies used by the organisations and the sources of information acquisition. Throughout the analysis, notable differences emerged based on the educational level of the participants and, consequently, on the focus group observed.

updated 19 December 2024

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Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 6976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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