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The Development Cooperation Landscape: Actors, Approaches, Architecture in Lithuania

Lithuanian National
Non-Governmental
Development Cooperation
Organizations' Platform

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The term Development Cooperation is not one of those that are easy to remember, often it is only those working in this field who are able to explain what it actually means. So what is development cooperation and what benefits does it bring to the public? What kind of development cooperation projects do Lithuania's NGOs implement and what are their thoughts on the various aspects of international cooperation?

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Lithuanian National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organizations' Platform

eurodad European Network on Debt and Development

Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija

To aim for positive changes in Lithuania and the world: Lithuanian NGO work in development cooperation

Lithuanian NGDO Platform

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Ukraine 2018. Mental Health Perspectives. Joe Wood photo.

The term Development Cooperation is not one of those that are easy to remember, often it is only those working in this field who are able to explain what it actually means. So what is development cooperation and what benefits does it bring to the public? What kind of development cooperation projects do Lithuania's NGOs implement and what are their thoughts on the various aspects of international cooperation? Here, representatives of three Lithuanian NGOs working in the fields of mental health, global education, and Eastern European studies discuss their work.

This article has been prepared by the Lithuanian Development Cooperation Platform, an umbrella organisation with more than 20 member NGOs active in the development cooperation field. All the NGOs described in this article are members of the Platform.

Ugnė Grigaitė, project manager, Mental Health Perspectives

"Established in 2000, our organisation has implemented more than 60 national and international projects. Our activities include research, analysis, trainings, advocacy, human rights monitoring, and participation in policy-making; additionally, we promote the bio-psycho-social approach to mental health that is person-focused and based on human rights. Our work is grounded in the principle of human rights indivisibility. We acknowledge that human rights violations harm the mental health not only of individuals but also the society as a whole.

We aim to use foreign best practices and adapt them to the Lithuanian context, including developing new community services. We participated in the successful development of innovative services, such as the Vilnius psycho-social rehabilitation centre RASTIS (2001), Centre for Eating Disorders (2001), Crisis Intervention Department at the Vilnius Centre for Mental Health (2004), and Crisis Management Centre (2015). We also provided expert knowledge for the development of the Act on Crisis/Mindletic smartphone app (2020).

In the development cooperation field, we are moving in the same direction. Over the last six years we were mostly working in Belarus and Ukraine, cooperating with local partners and NGOs with the aim to encourage transition from the segregation-based institutional care-home model to a diversity of community services, while at the same ensuring and protecting the rights of people experiencing difficulties with their mental health, as well as people with psycho-social and/or intellectual disability. Our organisation also monitors the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Lithuania as well as in our development cooperation

Belarus 2019. Mental Health Perspectives. Joe Woo photo

projects. In terms of values, this Convention is the basis of our work and the work of our development cooperation partners, as it clearly identifies international human rights standards that form the direction and the themes of our work.

In my opinion, best practices in development cooperation projects are always to do with partnerships, team work, learning about cultural differences and learning from each other, as well as sharing examples of good practices from different countries and varying social and cultural backgrounds.

One of such truly inspiring experiences for me happened in Belarus, where we were implementing one of our projects. Thanks to the huge advocacy efforts by our local partner organisation Офис по правам людей с инвалидностью, in 2016 Belarus finally ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Of course, it wasn't solely the outcome of our advocacy project, but I am absolutely sure that that project provided our local partners with more opportunities, tools, confidence and some sort of power to achieve this victory for human rights. Unfortunately, recently this partner organisation was liquidated, together with many others, by the Belarusian regime. Yet in spite of that, we maintain connection with our colleagues and hope that it will be figured out how to move forward in order to protect and ensure the rights of the most vulnerable groups in Belarus.

Right now we are about to conclude our "mini-project" series in Ukraine, which is part of our larger project. During this series we empowered six small local Ukrainian organisations to prepare and implement truly innovative mini-projects in the Donetsk and Poltava regions. We were so happy and inspired not only by the perseverance and professionalism of these small, financially lacking, understaffed organisations that are so far away from the capital city, but also by their limit-pushing creativity in developing new community services aimed at people with psycho-social and/or intellectual disability, while at the same time always respecting and protecting their rights.

To be honest, perhaps we are not putting enough effort into presenting our development cooperation work to the Lithuanian public regularly, as the major part of our communication and publicity activities is usually concentrated in project host countries together with local partners and sometimes international networks as well. As these activities are implemented in those countries and therefore their results are most relevant to their societies, information and public discourse is encouraged and pursued mostly on a local level, using various local media channels and social media. However, some information regarding our development cooperation activities is presented on our website and social media channels, and we regularly report to our donors who receive detailed information regarding our projects.

In my opinion, the most important aspect when preparing and implementing development cooperation projects is partnership, and equality and horizontal hierarchy between local and foreign partners. The real strength for development cooperation projects comes from co-operation based on mutual respect, team work, sharing good practices and available tools, and creating new tools and good practices together. And that is also my main recommendation to development cooperation projects: to never betray these principles and their related values."

Indrė Augutienė, Global Citizens Academy

"For me, development cooperation is first of all solidarity and mutual efforts by people and countries to seek positive changes in their communities. It is exactly how it reflects itself in our work: through our development cooperation activities we seek positive social changes in the non-formal children and youth education both in partner countries and here in Lithuania. To me development cooperation means tantamount efforts to share insights, approaches, experiences, and solutions that could be adapted from one country to another. It is also learning from each other and by doing so, creating a global community that is sustainable, just, and equal for all.

Our organisation takes two directions to achieve this. Firstly, it is important to us to encourage change and share our good practices in children's non-formal education and youth work with partner countries. Secondly, development cooperation plays a very important role in bringing a more global mindset and perspective into our global education activities with young people in Lithuania.

At the Global Citizens Academy, we take a systemic and continuous approach to our work. Although we as an organisation are mainly project-based, we always try to make sure that all our projects have a logical connection between them, that they are continuous and develop a more long-term dimension.

Indrė Augutienė, Global Citizens Academy

One of our recent projects called GLOBALAB in Action! brings together partners from four European and three East African countries, so we have participants from Lithuania, Bulgaria, Spain, Greece, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The main goal of this project is to find ways to encourage young people and empower them to actively engage with civil society work that would contribute to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. In this sense our main activities are capacity strengthening, trainings, and internships, as we share good practices on how to encourage civic activism in young people and to adapt it to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on a local level. Undoubtedly, the pandemic situation does not help in implementing our activities, however on a local level each partner organisation is putting effort to bring young people together and discover ways to adapt various good practices, methods, and tools to encourage civic activism in young people.

Another project, titled CARE WHAT YOU(TH) WEAR!, deals with problems and challenges in the textile industry and is aimed at specialists working directly with youth. The aim here is to create methodological-pedagogical tools that could be integrated into various global education activities both in Lithuania and in our partner countries. This project is implemented with partners in Europe and Asia, namely organisations from Lithuania, Italy, Greece, Nepal, and the Philippines. We want these methodological-pedagogical tools for youth work that we ourselves will create, be based on real-life stories from partner countries, dwelling into topics such as what happens in the cotton growing phase, problems with consumerism, challenges in the clothing production sector, and others. Through the implementation of various capacity-strengthening activities, we are planning to have a methodological publication and very concrete practical tools, based on the realities of our partner countries and responding to the needs of young people in each partner country. Again, the pandemic does not allow us to smoothly run our project activities, since most of them are based on international mobility. I have to admit that informal education activities cannot always be transferred to the remote digital sphere, no matter how much we seem to be advanced in our digitisation processes. I sincerely hope that in the near future we will be able to successfully continue these activities.

The work of the Global Citizens Academy mostly focuses on global education and its enlargement, as well as adaptation of its methods both in Lithuania and in our partner countries. We founded this Academy seven years ago with the aim to expand global citizenship education in the sphere of non-formal education for children and youth. It is of high importance to us that through our global partnerships with East African and Asian partners we transmit global values such as solidarity and respect for nature and human rights to the non-formal education in Lithuania. It is also very important to encourage the development of global education methods in our partner countries through our development cooperation activities.

Analysing the general situation of global education in Lithuania, I'd like to highlight several things. Although global education is slowly gaining access to Lithuanian schools and non-formal education and youth work, I must admit that these efforts are still very much fragmented and not always sustained. At the moment Lithuania is experiencing one of those seemingly never-ending educational reforms, general education curricula are being updated. We presented many proposals to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport on how the global dimension could be improved and global topics could be integrated into civic education classes in schools. But the answer from the Ministry that we received was this: they said that global citizenship is a "philosophical category" and that the Ministry does not intend to cultivate "global citizens" with its programmes. Such a message from the Ministry is sad and disappointing, but it is not surprising. Unfortunately, patriotism and love for one's country is still often put in opposition to global topics, even though, being completely honest, I don't see any opposition between these two thing at all. I can only express my disappointment that various political currents see it.

Despite all of this, I see a lot of great individual initiatives in schools. During our activities with schools we witness the fact that global education is very relevant to students and teachers alike. It is a way to bring today's realities to school life, things that have importance to contemporary young people. In spite of all the opposition and scepticism felt at the systemic political level, I believe it is incredibly important to work in this field and to pool together at least individual efforts. That is why we continue going in this direction as much as our capacities and opportunities allow us.

Another crucial aspect is that global education plays a very important role in strengthening public support for development cooperation activities. As we saw in our own research conducted in 2020, there is no correlation at all between public information campaigns implemented by state institutions on sustainable development and development cooperation, and public support to development cooperation and efforts to promote sustainable development. After analysing the data from the last several years, we saw that as funding for informing the public increases, public support for development cooperation decreases, and vice versa (this funding comes from the Development Cooperation and Democracy Promotion Programme, which is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Project Management Agency). Observing the actual events that took place in a given year we came to the conclusion that public support for development cooperation or humanitarian aid increases immediately after with a major crisis. Therefore public support increases

Eastern Europe Studies Centre

despite whether or not funding for informational campaigns increases. It is clear that public support depends on completely other factors and it is therefore of extreme importance to strengthen public awareness of global problems. One of the best tools to do that is global education.

Beatričė Narbutaitė, Eastern Europe Studies Centre

Here at the Centre our development cooperation focus is on bilateral assistance projects. As per our mandate, we carry out bilateral cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries.

In 2017-2018 we carried out a development cooperation project in Moldova and Georgia titled "Responsible Journalism School". Recently we presented a funding application for a project titled "Promoting connections between Lithuanian and Belarusian expert communities" and soon we will sign the contract. Due to the current political situation in Belarus and the active engagement of this country's civil society as well as the international community's attention to it, we at the Eastern Europe Studies Centre recommend further development of this sphere. In this case priority areas could be: projects that support and train civil society actors; work with independent media representatives; projects to integrate Belarusian nationals after their arrival in Lithuania; publication of analytical studies and reports.

Currently we are implementing a development cooperation project in Ukraine under the title "Support for independent journalism in Ukrainian regions", and recently we had our first training in Kiev. A huge advantage and long-lasting value for this event was the fact that it took place live, in-person, face-to-face. We have learned from the pandemic situation to plan our live activities for the summer months and even postpone them, if needed, in order to be able to have them live. After many long months of online-only activities people are experiencing what is now called the "zoom fatigue"; online events are having less and less value, because people are less engaged. In our project we paid attention to this factor accordingly, because our goal is not only to provide expert knowledge but also to create conditions for networking and contact-making, sharing experiences and generating new ideas, all of which is best achieved with real, personal contact. As shown by our experience and feedback from our previous project participants, live personal contact is a much more effective method for training and communication, because it helps maintain the participants' focus more effectively, is much more motivational and provides opportunities to informally cooperate with one another.

It is also very important to allow both the project participants and organisers to evaluate project outcomes and possible effects. That is why, if an opportunity arises, time should be given for potential project participants themselves to define problematic areas; having concluded the project relevant feedback should be gathered which would help assess the effectiveness of project activities, its programme, and impact on the participants.

During the implementation of a project and all its key phases we produce press releases which we then publish in Lithuanian media portals, EESC social media channels, and media in our partner countries. No doubt, in all our project-related articles, press releases, invitations, and publications we always note that the project was financed by the Development Cooperation and Democracy Promotion Programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

If there is content created in a specific project, or it involves training on content-creation, it is very important to include into the programme the condition that project participants must share that content in their local community or country. Additionally, the EESC controls a wide contact list that includes Lithuanian government institutions, academia, journalists, experts, and other public actors. The EESC regularly informs partners with our production which can also present material created during our projects. We also cooperate with Lithuania's top media platforms which can also be included in the dispersion of our content.

Eastern Europe Studies Centre

Race to the top: how tax justice can help solve global debt crisis

Lithuanian NGDO Platform

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Although it may not be highly on our minds these days while we're struggling with the suffocating lockdowns, the crisis we are living through will have – and is already having – a much larger effect on our lives in the years to come than we can possibly imagine. One aspect of it is the looming global debt crisis. But the good news is that solutions are possible and some of them come in the form of tax justice.

What Global Debt?

DIngo Ritz, Director of Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), a network of over 11,000 civil society organisations (CSOs), says that together with the health crisis there is a social and economic crisis, which is much more serious in low- and middle-income countries where hundreds of millions of people lost their jobs and incomes. He says that governments need to spend on health and social protection, yet they don't have the financial resources. One reason for this is tax evasion, another – the debt crisis.

"A new debt crisis started before the pandemic", says Ritz. "But with COVID it really got serious: foreign investment, tourism, most other sectors decreased dramatically, but suddenly governments had to spend more on health and social protection. So governments needed more money but had less tax income."

In 2020, debt increased by a third in low- and middle-income countries. It increased as well in rich countries, such as Japan, the US, and the EU. But the problem is that low- and middle-income countries can't borrow like rich countries do and they also have to spend much higher interests and pay a lot of their income for debt repayment, so they can't spend enough for health and social needs. "If they take new credits, which is what rich countries do, then their debt crisis will be more problematic in the future", says Ritz. "It is calculated that more than 150 countries had already to reduce their expenditures this year. That means austerity – cut spending in order to comply with their financial obligations. Remember what happened to Greece and other European countries after the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the effects of the extreme austerity imposed on the people."

GCAP Director explains that in the past, a bigger part of the credits came from governments in the Global North,

but this picture has changed. Currently, around one third of global debt is owed to governments; another third to private lenders such as banks and investment funds; and the last third – to multinational financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yet these latter two were among those who refused to postpone debt repayment for low-income countries as agreed by the G20. They demanded that countries, including those most hit by the crisis, continue repaying their debts with money they don't have.

A good example is the civil society-run Jubilee 2000 campaign, which called successfully for the cancellation of debt for the world's poorest countries, which – or "owed" – huge amounts of money to the rich ones. For decades, countries used their tax income or were even forced to take on new loans to pay back the old ones together with their rising interest rates. This meant that tax money collected from their citizens was not used for their own health, education, and other needs, but rather went into the pockets of already rich lenders. A similar pattern is emerging today.

While health crises affect people, their social-economic impacts on the population are tremendous. According to OXFAM, it will take the world's poorest people up to 10 years to recover from this current crisis, whereas over the last year the world's billionaires got even richer than they were before. Ritz is reminded of the old saying: if you owe the bank 100 dollars, the bank owns you. But if you owe the bank 100 million dollars, you own the bank.

"Private persons and companies can become insolvent and use a structured process. Countries cannot. Poor countries have to negotiate with a group of rich countries – the so-called Paris Club (now China joined the club) – without any internationally agreed process", explains GCAP director. "At the moment the financial interests of the rich countries and their banks are much better protected than the rights of people in low- and middle-income countries. This is very concrete: people are dying when the expenditures for health are cut. We need a mechanism to solve debt crisis, which is based on human rights." According to Ritz, one short-term solution to create resources during the ongoing crisis is for the IMF to create new funding – the so-called Special Drawing Rights. "Just like the US and the European Central Bank, the IMF can basically print money. That is difficult to believe, but the IMF already did this during the 2008-2009 financial crisis, when US $250 million were printed," he says. "Now a broad coalition of more than 200 civil society organistions demands US $3 trillion. The IMF proposed US $650 billion, which is by far not enough based on their own calculations."

Another more long-term solution, and more sustainable for the future, is tax justice.

Tax the Dodgers

But what is tax justice? The UK-based Tax Justice Network provides this definition: "Tax justice refers to ideas, policies and advocacy that seek to achieve equality and social justice through fair taxes on wealthier members of society and multinational corporations. To this end, tax justice often focuses on tackling tax havens and curtailing corruption and tax abuse by multinational corporations and the super-rich." Multinational corporations are estimated

Ingo Ritz

to shift US $1.38 trillion worth of profit into tax havens every year, costing countries 245 billion US dollars in lost corporate tax annually. Among these multinationals are many IT companies, such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook, that make enormous profits yet generally don't pay proper tax anywhere. In 2018 US billionaires paid less tax than their secretaries, according to Tax Justice Network. They avoid it by shifting profits from the countries where they produce and/or sell their products to a so-called tax haven, i. e. a country that has little or no corporate tax requirement. The process is mostly secret and while you as a working citizen would be fined and persecuted by the government if you failed to pay your tax, the rich get away with the exact same action on a much larger scale, and most often it is not legally considered a crime.

Maruša Babnik, networking and project coordinator with the Ljubljana-based Ekvilib Institute, explains here in an email interview why tax justice is needed and how it can be achieved. Ekvilib Institute is the first Slovenian civil society organisation that started working in the field of tax justice, with their Stop Tax Dodging project that started to be implemented in 2013.

Maruša, if you were to explain in everyday language what tax justice is, where would you start?

This is a question that comes up often, especially since our audiences usually have their own perceptions of what justice in the field of tax would be.

Tax justice that we are advocating for is for governments to repair the national and international tax rules to ensure that multinational corporations and wealthy individuals pay their share to the societies which they operate and live in, without taking extra steps to decrease their tax bills. In practice that means we are calling for increased tax transparency – e.g. for multinationals to report where they do business, how much profit they make there and

how much they contribute in tax, and to disclose who owns what – and we call for the prevention of the use of tax practices that facilitate tax evasion and tax avoidance, as well as that the international rules be made by all the countries that these rules affect, which is not the current practice.

I am from Slovenia where financial literacy is quite low, so we also focus on presenting the positive role that tax already plays or should be playing in our societies.

Historically, what factors have caused and are still causing tax injustice? What are the main forms that it takes and who are the main actors involved?

Tax rules can lessen inequality within countries and between countries when working in accordance with the basic purposes of taxation. However, the system – as it is set now – is broken. Countries have almost complete control of their own tax laws, which means we have a lot of national tax systems, that can and do vary from each other, developing loopholes that companies can exploit. And then there are countries that are deciding on international tax rules without including the rest of the world in their decision-making, only patching up the broken and unfair system they themselves built in the first place (in the case of OECD). The globalised world requires an effective international tax system, agreed on equal footing by all the governments.

Tax dodging is an old story with a long history, but it went in overdrive with globalisation. However, only the recent financial crisis of 2008 and tax scandals that followed (Lux Leaks, Swiss Leaks, Panama Papers...) really highlighted the scope of tax dodging to the public, at least in our parts of the world. Trying to survive with austerity measures while bailing out banks and companies, and hearing about the huge estimated amounts of profits piled in tax havens, do not go well together. However, it is yet to build up the necessary political will and to lead to real changes to the underlying causes of the problem: tax secrecy and inadequate tax co-operation between countries, to name just two.

Talking about the main actors in tax injustice – these are the governments of countries participating in the so-called race to the bottom on corporate taxation. Among them most notably tax havens, but other countries are also participating. Since the 1980s, global corporate tax rate fell from over 40% to below 25%. And yet, some countries are going even further to attract business – offering secrecy and adopting harmful tax practices such as special individual tax agreements for multinationals, which facilitate them to pay little or no tax (the case of Lux Leaks). The list of tax havens is much longer than the one that the EU and OECD put together, as some of the strongest tax havens are actually EU and OECD members, which highlights the problem of OECD proposing solutions to international rules. One of the issues is also the cross-border rules in place, which were initially developed to avoid double taxation of the same individual's or company's activities by two countries, however some of these rules can also be used to facilitate double non-taxation by companies and individuals – as is the case of Apple.

„Ekvilib" photo/Marusa Babnik

Often overlooked is the role of the intermediaries. These can include tax advisors, corporate lawyers, banks, accountants, and others who are offering advice and assistance to multinational corporations and wealthy individuals seeking to dodge taxes.

What are the obstacles associated to achieving tax justice that you identify?

The first step towards achieving tax justice is transparency. It is essential that decision-makers and the public know about the current practices in order to address appropriately and effectively that what is broken. Therefore, the public needs to be able to see, for example, who owns what, which multinational is operating in which country under what name, how much they earn there, and how much they contribute to that society in taxes.

There are three solutions we have been advocating for in terms of transparency. Firstly, Automatic Exchange of Information between tax authorities. Although this is already in place, some countries, especially the ones where tax authorities have less capacity, are excluded. Second, we are calling for the implementation of a Beneficial Owners register, which would show who actually owns what (beneficial owners are natural persons behind legal owners that can also be companies). The EU addressed this in the Anti-money laundering directive, but its implementation is lacking. However, as the #OpenLux scandal demonstrated not long ago, registers provide actual results – the information came out from Luxembourg's register of beneficial owners. Our third proposed solution is Country by Country Reporting – public disclosure of large companies' business information on a country by country basis. Here, reports would include, among other things, what country a multinational enterprise is present in, how much profit they make, how many people they employ there and lastly, how much they are contributing in taxes. Something similar is already mandatory for EU banks.

As I said, tax secrecy is only the first obstacle. Apart from that we need governments to start promoting progressive tax systems, built on the understanding that tax policies can have either positive or negative effects on inequalities within the country and between countries. It is urgent that countries stop the race to the bottom, in which they compete among themselves by lowering corporate tax rates or introducing harmful tax practices that facilitate corporate tax avoidance.

And finally, tax justice cannot be achieved without true international decision-making on tax matters, in which all countries are participating on equal footing, one that is fair and transparent, and open to observers. This is far from how international tax matters are being discussed for the past 60 years and more.

Through your work, what perceptions of tax justice have you noticed among the public?

One of the first lessons we learned was that we need to start from the very basics: what tax is, why we need it and what it pays for. Then explain the national tax system, so we are all on the same page before we start discussing more complex issues. That doesn't mean that the public has no knowledge about taxation. Far from it. But tax is something that is not being discussed or taught – not in schools, not at home. So the second lesson we learned was: tax is a personal matter. The result of that is that people have a limited view of the system, which then informs their understanding of it and their perception of what tax justice would be.

So it's not hard to understand why you can hear a public school teacher saying that taxes should be cut and at the same time that their salary is too low, and telling you how they buy things from companies known for avoiding taxes; or why a public servant believes that we should give a break to tax avoiders since they built what they have with their own hands. No person is an island, as they say. And that is even more true in a country with public healthcare, public education, and other public services and infrastructure.

What tools are available for people to fight tax injustice in their countries both in the Global North and in the Global South?

It is the same as fighting on policy level – the first step is transparency or, in other words, being well informed and informing others. Be aware of taxes around you, watch, listen, read, question, and discuss tax avoidance and tax justice with others. Another level is to send questions and demands to policymakers, join initiatives – sign petitions, spread the word through the communication channels you use. Join the global movement for tax justice – there are different initiatives and tools made available in the Global North and the Global South. One example is the very recent WeMoveEurope petition to stop tax dodging. Question the companies you are buying from. Support public reporting of company data on country by country basis as this gives countries with weaker capacities to monitor economic activities and collection of taxes a chance to gain vital information to close possible loopholes and collect taxes.

This way – as well as through publications by researchers and investigative journalists – the fight for tax justice was brought to the political arenas in many countries, as well as on the international level. However, there is still a lack of political will in the countries that are currently making international tax rules, therefore public pressure must continue and grow stronger.

Is tax justice even possible in the current financial / capitalist system that we live in?

Tax justice is not only possible, but needed for the current system not to implode. Without redistribution of wealth through progressive taxes we will continue to see wealth being concentrated among the very few. Regressive taxes such as VAT (which were introduced also to counter the decrease in corporate income taxes and wealth taxes) additionally increase the inequalities, further diminishing the consumer power of people whose wages are already stagnating, having long-term effects on public services and infrastructure used by people and the companies themselves, all in the name of short-term profit maximisation. The current financial and capitalist system is not sustainable without putting in place some limitations – one being a fair tax system.

These are difficult times for humanitarians too: notes from NOHA Spring School

Lithuanian NGDO Platform
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Lithuanian NGDO Platform / PCPM Polish Center for International, medical training in West Bank Palestine

NOHA Spring School in Humanitarian Action, co-organised by Vilnius University and Lithuanian Development Cooperation Platform, supported by Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is a short term introductory course to train people involved in the humanitarian sector. NOHA Network on Humanitarian Action is an international association of universities that aims to enhance professionalism in humanitarian action.

On challenges in humanitarian action

"There are many," says Bob Ghosn, humanitarian aid worker who has served in different capacities with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UNICEF, among others, implementing projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Iraq, Guantanamo, Liberia, Jordan, and other territories.

To begin with, the numbers are not looking good. Ghosn says that in 2018, more than 200 million people worldwide were considered as being in need of humanitarian assistance. Overall in that same year humanitarian assistance reached almost US $30 billion; yet UN agencies that provide it are facing a budget shortfall by some 40%, meaning that they receive only around 60% of the amounts that they request. The world's three largest donors for humanitarian assistance are the US, the EU, and the UK, which together account for 75% of all government contributions.

At the same time, financial poverty in the world is increasing in mind-boggling numbers, and behind these numbers there are very real people with very real daily struggles. After decades of numerous efforts to reduce financial poverty, a lot of progress that has been achieved is now being reversed due to the devastating lockdowns that have been imposed on the world for the last year and a half. Millions of people have been thrown (back) into extreme poverty, with the total number projected to reach up to 150 million by the end of 2021. Poverty not only means lack of access to nutritious food, clean water, or other basics, but also takes a huge toll on health. For example, according to OCHA and other agencies, non-communicable disease diagnosis and treatment has been affected dramatically, with antenatal care and cancer diagnosis and treatment dropping on average by 55%, and mental health treatment experiencing a huge disruption of around 60%. Healthcare, education, and other areas are being hugely impacted and for humanitarian workers, that is posing a challenge on an unprecedented scale.

Another huge challenge for the humanitarian field is the erection of borders and fences. "We have more and more borders that are harder and harder, [we have] fences, there is this whole criminalization of migration and then the issue of access [to the people in need]," says Ghosn. "This brings questions of security of humanitarian personnel, which is at the core of humanitarian work – not to put people or operations at risk." He explains that in conflict times and zones, access to aid delivery should not be

taken for granted: it is negotiated on a daily basis based on acceptance. In reality this means that humanitarian workers have to explain to those controlling an area why they are there, what they want to do and how, and also show to those "in charge" what added value they could bring. The fact that local populations need food, for example, is not sufficient enough to open the roads for humanitarian workers to come in with trucks to deliver it. In such cases people's basic needs are used as a trading card by those involved in a conflict and aid delivery becomes a carrot to the people when it is allowed in and a stick when it is not. And yet, Ghosn says, "Humanitarian organisations are not meant to stop wars or armed conflicts. They are there to reduce the suffering of the people. As a humanitarian, I stand with the victims. But I am not the one to judge the perpetrators' actions." This provides a good opportunity to remember the four fundamental principles that guide humanitarian action, as set by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. However, based on his experience in the field, Bob says that these principles are "different in reality when you have difficult choices to make, even though they look good on posters in Brussels".

For people who are or are planning to be involved in humanitarian action, Ghosn advises to seriously consider what they are realistically able to achieve. World peace? He points to peace-building organisation, not humanitarian ones. "[Humanitarian organisations] are not promoting peace," he says. "Peace is a political statement." For example, removing certain politicians by force is not on the humanitarian agenda, which is there to help people in need. "Peace is only one way to change the world, there are others. But it is not your role as a humanitarian to promote either." However, a challenge emerges here for the humanitarian worker: how should one deal with a situation where, for instance, their humanitarian efforts in the Sahel are being funded by the government of France, which is politically and militarily involved in the conflict in that same Sahel? The answer, Ghosn says, is to act grounded in the humanitarian principle of impartiality: that is to say, secure funding and help people and at the same time not get dragged into political agendas.

Which is extremely hard to do. Ghosn admits that by definition, taking funding is not a neutral thing: it always comes with strings attached. For instance, funding from US government institutions always requires from those receiving their funding to adhere to strict requirements how and for whom that funding is to be used. Unsurprisingly, many organisations are hesitant to take it but lacking other sources of funding are more and more often forced to do so.

With funding comes the issue of how that money is used. The 2016 Grand Bargain was an agreement between donors and international humanitarian organisations on humanitarian action effectiveness and efficiency. It includes such tools as "Greater Transparency", increase in cash-based programming, inclusion of people receiving aid in making decisions that affect their lives, and others. "But it's a big bubble," Ghosn says. Five years on, the implementation of the principles and actions envisaged in the Grand Bargain is still very slow. One major reason for that is bureaucracy: as Ghosn says, "the humanitarian

Norwegian Red Cross photo

sector is really good at bureaucratising things because it's a big machinery, and it's heavy". It is also complex, because the humanitarian field is vast and includes such differing issues as the status of stateless people in Lithuania and migrants in the Mediterranean being pushed back to Northern Africa or left to die in the sea by European coastal agencies. And it is very politicised because governments and other donors have their own agendas. Navigating these is often a very time- and energy-consuming process.

One of the things among those proposed as part of the Grand Bargain was the "Nexus", which is Latin for "connection" or "link": an intersection of humanitarian action and development activities. This one was renamed "Double Nexus", since later peace-building was also added to the mix by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and titled "Triple Nexus". "But these three – humanitarian, development, peace-building – are not linear processes, because they are all needed at the same time and not one after the other," says Ghosn. Accordingly, there has been significant criticism of the Triple Nexus concept and its implementation. "Humanitarian actors are concerned that integration with "peace" is a guise for securitised approaches and that they will be asked to collaborate not with peacebuilding actors but rather with militaries engaged in stabilisation and counter-terrorism," write Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton in their 2020 research article. "There is also fear that powerful Western donors are pushing reforms to demonstrate cost-effectiveness in an era of public scepticism towards aid and to meet security rather than humanitarian or developmental objectives, principally stemming the flow of migration." The agreement," write Louise Redvers and Ben Parker in The New Humanitarian, "means donors must take a broader look at how they fund humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding initiatives, and be more flexible. They shouldn't for example, just pour money into emergency response when longer-term projects, such as education programmes, new infrastructure, or social cohesion work may have the potential to reduce tensions and ultimately need."

Bulgarian Red Cross photo

A new way of doing things has been getting a grip on the humanitarian sector as it has on other areas of life, namely technology. "The assumption that technology is neutral is not true," says Ghosn. "The world, including the humanitarian sector, is being shifted more and more towards technology and the digital way of doing things." This includes not only "Zoom" calls between an organisation's HQ in Europe and people in partner countries, but also such initiatives as mobile money. Another example of what can be done remotely is Forensic Architecture, a research agency investigating human rights violations. One of their investigations was into European arms used in the bombing of Yemen and it was done remotely, without the need for team members to fly to Yemen to conduct their research. Yemen's people are living through one of the worst humanitarian disasters of this century, being bombed by Saudi Arabia-led coalition for the sixth consecutive year.

Other critical areas for the humanitarian sector, according to Ghosn, are cyber warfare, environmental migrants, and fights over water. He warns: "These things are not coming in the future. They are already here."

On direct response to natural disasters

Dr Wojtek Wilk, CEO of PCPM, has first-hand experience of humanitarian action in action. PCPM is the Polish acronym for Polish Center for International Aid, one of the three largest Polish international NGOs. It focuses on both humanitarian and development aid and also has its own Rapid Response Medical Team, or Emergency Medical Team (EMT). PCPM has long-term offices in Palestine, Iraq, Ukraine, Kenya, and a few others, with projects being implemented in Georgia, Burkina Faso, and other places.

Dr Wilk explains that international humanitarian action is always related to context. For example, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in Japan wouldn't bring such disastrous consequences as it would in Nepal, due to Japan's higher capacities to deal with such events and a high level of preparedness. Therefore in such a scenario Japan calling for international humanitarian assistance would probably be unlikely, while Nepal would most certainly require it.

In general, disaster management cycle starts with an emergency event and goes through four stages: immediate (emergency) response, which takes two weeks up to a month or two; recovery – post-disaster reconstruction; mitigation – prevention of that same disaster from happening again; and preparation for a similar disaster or event. This cycle applies to sudden emergencies such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts. However, what we are used to seeing is a linear humanitarian response, wherein emergency response is followed by humanitarian aid, then recovery and transition from humanitarian needs to development tasks, and finally the phase of development aid. In this linear approach, at the beginning there is a delay in funding, which then suddenly shoots up. Although there is never enough money, at this stage there is more money allocated to that particular event than there was before. Usually after a few weeks or months from the start of the emergency the funding reaches its peak and then plateaus before starting a gradual decline. Early on during the recovery/transition stage, there is something called "the CNN effect", which is related to the media: as long as the emergency is on the media, the funding continues. But the moment something else happens or the media gets bored, the money starts flowing somewhere else. This, Dr Wilk says, is what happened with the war in Syria, when a lot of the funding for humanitarian/development aid dried up as soon as the war on Yemen started, when governments transferred their humanitarian funding there. After that, the funding decreases until international funding institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund start moving in, usually two-three or more years after the initial emergency. "The problem is that the funding decreases while people's humanitarian needs are still there," says Dr Wilk.

Disasters themselves have different types. First, there are the natural ones (earthquakes, floods, volcano eruptions, tsunamis, etc.). Then there are the so-called environmental emergencies which are technological or industrial accidents, such as collapsed dams or oil spills. This category, says Dr Wilk, also includes large forest fires because they are often caused by humans. Another disaster category

is complex emergencies which include conflict situations and civil wars. And then there are pandemic emergencies, like the Ebola one in Western Africa in 2013-2016. They all pose the need for humanitarian action but require different approaches.

Undoubtedly, such disasters have a huge toll on human health. Immediately after a natural disaster there is a huge spike in trauma and broken or fractured body parts and wounds as well as, often, infectious diseases. The problem here is that in such situations people don't usually go to hospitals because they are often already full; while later on, non-disaster related diseases or other medical needs (cancer treatment, maternity issues, surgeries) accumulate immensely because during an emergency people were forced to wait to be admitted and taken care of. This creates a rolling ball of non-health both during emergencies and for a long time after them.

Polish EMTs operate only in response to calls for international humanitarian assistance: they don't go if they are not invited. Dr Wilk says that their presence in a foreign setting has to be confirmed by local authorities which give PCPM permission to practise medicine in the area they claim authority in. One such situation occurred in 2015, after an earthquake struck Nepal. Polish EMTs arrived in the most affected area and set up a field hospital unit where they took care of the wounded. They also brought humanitarian aid – blankets, water purification tablets and other such things, in order to prevent the outbreak of diseases, and set up temporary shelters for people whose homes had been destroyed in the earthquake. That was their immediate response.

One example of longer-term engagement in humanitarian efforts is the assistance to refugees and other displaced persons in Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, around 60% of its total population of 22 million – some 13 million people – are displaced, half of them being refugees and the other half internally displaced persons (IDPs). Three quarters of the displaced – around 11 million people – are in need of humanitarian aid. "Syria was the biggest humanitarian crisis of the last decade," Dr Wilk says, "before Yemen." In neighbouring Lebanon, there are around 1 million Syrian refugees, in addition to around half a million refugees from Palestine that have been forced out from their land by the newly-created Israel in 1948. In Lebanon, PCPM provides Syrian refugees with temporary employment under the "Cash for Work" scheme – paying salaries for labour-intensive, low-maintenance jobs such as laying pavements, digging or cleaning drainage channels, etc. Another similar scheme is "Cash for Rent", whereby the agency covers accommodation costs for refugees who do not want to live in horrendous conditions in tents. Dr Wilk says that Polish PCPM prefers focusing on solutions that maintain the dignity of the person who is receiving aid, therefore cash assistance is preferred to other means that may be more patronising. PCPM also helps out with exporting agricultural products, as many Syrians in Lebanon are employed in agriculture.

Used to working in emergencies and in areas affected by natural events, Polish EMTs were first deployed in a different setting in response to Covid-19 – first to Italy, then to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Lebanon, and Ethiopia. In Lebanon, they also assisted people after the 2020 August explosion in Beirut port.

But challenges remain many, and then some. Dr Wilk admits that collapsing economies lead to instability and migration, increase in unemployment, poverty, aid dependency, delayed access to medical treatment, and lack of funding. Yet the means are changing slightly: for example, humanitarian agencies that have been focusing on IDPs or refugees are now needed to support local host populations. "So when Polish doctors are needed at home, they stay in Poland instead of being deployed elsewhere," says Dr Wilk.

PCPM Polish Center for International Aid, Lebanon

Lithuanian empathy barometer: most would agree to help citizens from impoverished countries

Lithuanian NGDO Platform

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Though gradually, the population's mood is "greening," and Lithuanians speak increasingly firmly on aiding people from other countries.

The absolute majority of Lithuanians have heard nothing of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and development cooperation. Based on a representative survey performed by Spinter Research in May of this year, four in ten Lithuanians (80%) said so. Despite this, an entire 70% of respondents agreed that it is worth helping people in less economically developed countries.

"We have been in the European Union for 17 years now. During this period, most Lithuanians have experienced what European Union funding means. We have begun living better. It appears that the sense of solidarity is infectious – if we, a no longer impoverished country, live better ourselves, why not help others," Consumer Alliance vice president and member of the European Economic and Social Committee commented on the general mood of Lithuanians.

Allocated millions still not enough

Every second Lithuanian (45%) would agree that part of the taxes they pay could be allocated to alleviating poverty in less fortunate countries in the world. Every year, around 0.12% of the GDP is allocated from the state budget to development cooperation policy implementation.

"This zero-point-one per cent comprises an average of 50 million euro every year. This is a little more than the state's present allocated amount to build fencing along the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Of course, you can't achieve miracles with such a sum. Still, this funding is significant for those living in particularly developing countries or war zones," Ugnė Kumparskaitė, the director of the National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations' Platform, said in a press conference on 19th of July.

According to U. Kumparskaitė, the financing is directed towards a diverse set of projects, ranging from installing solar power plants to strengthening the IT sector, to education and agriculture to humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Moldova, Syria, Yemen, and numerous other countries around the world. However, compared to other countries, Lithuania is among those allocating only a small part of its budget to development cooperation and is currently not fulfilling its commitment to allocate 0.33% of its GDP.

Good deeds spring back

The survey revealed that a fifth of citizens are aware of or have heard of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. Typically, this is among the most educated citizens and those with the highest incomes.

"It's probably natural that most people do not follow "tough topics". National news media also does not feature this topic often. Nevertheless, local policymakers for foreign affairs should give thought on how to better inform the public on where and for what taxpayer money is spent," Ugnė Kumparskaitė says. She added that an increased public involvement would become particularly important because, over the coming decade, the sum allocated to development cooperation from the Lithuanian budget is due to triple.

Citizens must know that their money contributes to welfare in other countries and that of Lithuanian citizens. Lithuania itself is participating in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in other countries around the world and at home. For example, while contributing to the first goal of reducing poverty, Lithuania must support

Ugnė Kumparskaitė. BNS photo

other countries and resolve the problem of poverty domestically.

"Lithuania is already making progress in biodiversity conservation, clean water, "green" energy, and other areas related to sustainable development. This is essential because, after all, the entirety of Europe is walking down the path of the Green Deal, and the reforms accompanying it will impact every single household. Citizens must know what reforms await them, why they are needed, and how they are beneficial," the head of the National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations' Platform stated.

Relinquishing some personal profit

The Lithuanian people's sustainability inclinations are reflected in their willingness to relinquish some profits for the sake of protecting the planet's future. 75% of respondents in the country indicated that it was important for them that investment funding would be allocated while complying with the principle of "sustainable investment" – that is to say, investing in transparently managed, socially responsible and environmentally friendly businesses. The share of those thinking this way has increased by 4 percentage points since 2019.

"This outlook shows that people understand what changes depend on – if there is no sustainable investment, you won't achieve the desired effect. We are used to hearing that financial benefit comes first. However, the Green Deal is accompanied by shifts in public thinking – the financial benefit is no longer as important – moral principles of social justice and containing the climate crisis are becoming more crucial," Kęstutis Kupšys says.

He also emphasised that there has been an increase in number of people who would even intentionally agree to receive lower profits given the condition that their money would be invested in sustainable, environmentally friendly and transparent businesses. Only around 40% of respondents would disagree with relinquishing even some profit in the name of "higher" goals, while the rest would conditionally agree to relinquish even a fifth of gains for the sake of sustainability.

"This is a key message to banks and investment funds. Citizens are prepared to relinquish some profits for the sake of the planet's wellbeing. This intent can no longer be ignored and you can no longer hide behind rebuttals that, supposedly, investing sustainably isn't worthwhile," K. Kupšys explained at the press conference.

Insufficient awareness

Representatives from the National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations' Platform and the Consumer Alliance say that education is particularly lacking among citizens regarding environmental conservation, climate change, sustainability, sustainable development, sustainable finance, energy conservation, and other questions.

"We see that the public has matured for the changes carried by the European Green Deal. However, we also see how severely we lack information and education measures for the people. The changes that await in the coming decades can only be accomplished by an educated and informed society," K. Kupšys and U. Kumparskaitė both noted at the press conference.

According to the NGO representatives, while the survey was performed prior to the migrant crisis that struck Lithuania this year, the results would be similar if it were conducted now.

UAB Spinter Research performed the public opinion survey in late May 2021. 1010 individuals aged 18 to 75 were interviewed across Lithuania. The survey aimed to uncover the public opinion on the application of investments.

Kęstutis Kupšys. BNS photo

About the Consumer Alliance

The Consumer Alliance was founded in 2012 by seven organisations, and now it brings together ten non-governmental consumer organisations, including the Lithuanian Consumer Association, Lithuanian Consumer Union, Consumer Rights Protection Centre, Lithuanian Association of Bank Customers, the Lithuanian Citizens Advice Union, National Association of Financial Services Consumers, Association "For Honesty in Banking," and others. The Consumer Alliance is the only Lithuanian consumer umbrella organisation to hold membership with the European Consumer Organisation BEUC.

The alliance's identification number in the European Union Transparency Register is: 506497923503-90.

About the National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations' Platform

The National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations' Platform is an association that brings together organisations from Lithuania working in the fields of development cooperation, global education, sustainable development, and humanitarian action. The platform was founded in 2007 and currently includes 21 organisations.

Humanitarian workers: reflections on why we do what we do

Lithuanian NGDO Platform

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Ieva Vaitkūnaitė

It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who said,"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" Here, NOHA Spring School on Humanitarian Action participants share their thoughts on what motivates them in their work, and reflect on the need for professional training programmes. *NOHA (Network on Humanitarian Action) is an international association of universities that aims to enhance professionalism in humanitarian action.

Ieva Vaitkūnaitė, Legal Researcher focusing on International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law:

Growing up, I knew myself to be an empathic person, but I didn't know yet that there was another, deeper dimension to it. Luckily, I realised early on that knowledge and education could change the world. This idea has motivated me to be courageous, never stop exploring novel international humanitarian law topics, and, above all, write about them.

I am a researcher focusing on international humanitarian law. Being a lawyer by trade has always inspired me to tackle the most challenging societal issues and aim for providing various possible solutions. My professional path was never linear. However, some of the topics I am passionate about follow me everywhere. One of them is the protection of cultural heritage. For the last two years, I have worked on extensive research, analysing cultural heritage destruction during the Yugoslav wars. Subsequently, due to evolving climate change issues, I embarked on a new project to examine World Heritage protection from the perspective of environmental law. In the future, I would like to pursue a career in the human rights field.

The main challenge in the humanitarian field for me was to actually enter it. I think everyone working in this sector has faced it. The best solution for me was to gather as much international experience as I could. Gradually, I built my expertise and skill-set from one country to another. Ultimately, it resulted in me learning to adjust swiftly to changing working environments. Also, looking back, it was those many gutsy decisions that helped me to break into the sector. I remember knocking on international organisations' doors and volunteering my services. The most valuable lesson I learned is that it is much easier for someone to say yes when you are there in person, and many organisations are desperate for some extra hands.

The humanitarian field was not an exception for an urgent digitalization catalysed by the spread of COVID-19. Technology, innovations, and the use of big data are massively shaping the demand for humanitarian capacity-building. This means that humanitarian action training will need to include new topics so that humanitarian workers could use technology to its full potential. Given that capacity-building involves sharing knowledge, expertise, and good practices, NOHA is an exemplary association capable of gathering humanitarian experts from different backgrounds and raising awareness about the newest trends in the sector.

During the NOHA training, I had the distinct pleasure to meet many hard-working people and gain valuable insights into the non-profit sector. The knowledge I acquired from the topics such as psychological preparedness, current challenges of humanitarian action, and predictions on how COVID-19 will shape the humanitarian sector will help me considerably in my future endeavours. However, the most rewarding part was discussions with other participants who shared practical experiences and valuable critical views from their field missions. The NOHA training was an enriching addition for a meaningful start I am about to take in the international human rights law programme at Lund University.

Linda van der Wijk, director of a small Dutch NGO Charity Fund Rijsholt:

I've been interested in humanitarian action and development since I was young, and started focusing on NGOs when I was working on my thesis for my Master's degree in Management and Organisation. For my thesis I did participatory research at two women's NGOs in Zimbabwe. I realised in recent years that the development sector can learn from the humanitarian sphere, especially when it comes to humanitarian principles. Also, my experiences during the COVID -19 pandemic have taught me that in times of crisis the division between development and humanitarian action sometimes needs to be set aside. I really think I have moved closer to the field of humanitarian action and would like to continue that journey and use my knowledge of the development sector as a base. Current geo-political and socio-political trends result in a greater need and with that my motivation has only become stronger.

At the moment I am more positioned in development than in the humanitarian field. Being the director of a small NGO I wear many hats, ranging from hands-on involvement in projects to evaluation and reporting and day-to-day organisation management. We entered into long-term relationships with local project partners and currently fund around 10 projects. Education, the right to life in dignity and the right to self-determination are central aspects in all our work. Most of our projects are in India, the Netherlands, and Thailand.

For me the main challenges throughout my engagement in the humanitarian sphere have been psychological and social. Psychologically in the sense of "how do you deal with balancing what you experience in the field and the privileged life you have at home", and how to cope without the constant sense of necessity (or adrenalin) that keeps you going in the field. For me, dealing with that tension became easier and easier with experience, and with realising that it is OK to take time for yourself to decompress. Socially it is sometimes hard to keep connections when you are travelling a lot and not present for things that are important events for friends and family. But in this way I learned what is important and what is not, and when I really need to be there. You realise that sometimes you need to make some extra effort.

The recent training in humanitarian action offered by NOHA was interesting and useful. It was good to spend time with like-minded people, learn more about the specifics of humanitarian action as opposed to development. It re-affirmed my belief that development should follow the humanitarian principles too, to make it universal as it is meant to be under the UN 2030 Agenda. I keep going back to all the sessions from those three days, but especially have incorporated or try to incorporate the knowledge from the sessions by Robert Ghosn about the current challenges of humanitarian action (which are actually not so different from the challenges faced in development), Dr Sulagna Maitra who talked about the principles of humanitarian action, the session on psychological preparedness by Cristal Palacios Yumar, the session on the impact of

Linda van der Wijk

COVID-19 on INGOs by Dr Wojtek Wilk, and the sessions by Justinas Stankus.

Undoubtedly, there is always a need for capacity building and strengthening, both on a personal level for me, as well as in the field – and that includes development and humanitarian action. NOHA has an important role to play as it can draw on a wide base of both academic and practical knowledge, gives students exposure and through the diversity of its network also provides access to knowledge coming out of different schools of thought.

Abdulla Chahine, Communication Consultant at Red Cross Kaunas Center, Lithuania:

Working within the Lithuanian Red Cross programme dedicated to the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, my mission is to bridge the gap in the local community – and by "gap" I mean this imaginary gap between people who don't feel local, and locals. From interviews and research I found that when it comes to integration, there is a fear involved on both sides, as well as lack of acceptance and conservatism: from a homogeneous community that is not very ready to open up, to an expat community afraid of joining in. So I work on creating more social inclusion, aiming to involve communities in activities that would get people closer to each other no matter where they come from, what they do, or what social class they belong to. In this programme we help people find information and jobs, provide them with legal and psychological support, and Lithuanian language lessons. My task is to communicate that both internally and externally, making sure that our message aligns well with values that we work all day to achieve.

Before coming to Lithuania for my Master's degree, I volunteered at the World Wildlife Fund in the Emirates. In Kaunas I joined the local hospice – Kauno Hospiso Namai – as a volunteer, providing warm visits for people with fatal diseases and disabilities. Being a musician, I play music for them and help them process their emotions. That's part of my background, and as for the future, to be honest I don't like being defined within a label. I've always been that guy who cannot turn a blind eye to a person who asks for help. If you want to call that humanitarian field – great. I will always help when help is needed. But I don't want to be defined by one thing only. I am me and I love what I do and it is why I do it.

In the humanitarian field I'm not looking for power. All I want is to make my surroundings better for me and for everyone else, because there has to be some kind of balance in this world. There must be people helping others without any financial gain or asking anything in return. Some people are hungry and some people provide them with food. If someone needs legal or emotional support – someone should be able to provide it. Someone has to offer these things to people for free.

We are on this journey every day. It can be overwhelming for those who work in this field to understand what responsibilities they are handling, as they deal with other people's problems. It is also very important to know how to process those emotions and traumas.

Are we in the humanitarian field "doing the right thing"? That is just one way of looking at it. Personally, I don't see it as "doing the right thing", and that keeps me at peace with everything. My philosophy is this: I know we are wrong, and we can only be less wrong tomorrow. To know that tomorrow you can be less wrong is very satisfying and it's one of the best motivations to move forward. Similarly, when analysing the impact of your humanitarian efforts, there are many variables involved. As a communicator, I'm thinking first about communication channels, about who is communicating, what the message is, how much we are investing in it, what actions we take. How do we measure impact? What metrics are we using? Is it the number of people involved, did we change a law, can we collaborate or merge with entities that would help us achieve our goals?

During the NOHA course, there was a lot that resonated with the work that I'm doing. Of course, there were times when I felt that the presenters could have done a better job, but there is always space for improvement. I asked one of the speakers, Bob Ghosn: "What should we do when, working in a conflict zone, we doubt that we are on the right side?" He said, "Remember: if you are there to take sides, it's not the place for you. The Red Cross only focuses on helping people." This idea stuck to me: we are there to help people, not to judge who is right or wrong. He also mentioned that the best way to be apolitical is to be extremely political and put yourself in people's shoes no matter their side. This is what we stand for. Another very important point was the psychologist talking about how to process emotions in the field. She talked about how the human body goes through processing things: shaking, crying, dancing, laughing, talking, sleeping, walking, reading... I realised that I naturally do all these things already. When I forget or postpone processing emotions, my body will force me to do it. She was absolutely right. Now I am more aware and I consciously know what my body is going through.

Abdulla Chahine