



‘Responding to the coronavirus at home and abroad’

HERE, Now, and in the Future Series

Notes from the interview with Kostas Moschochoritis, Intersos, 3 April 2020

Based in Rome since 1992, INTERSOS, a humanitarian organisation on the frontline of emergencies, has brought assistance to victims of armed conflicts, natural disasters, and extreme exclusion with particular attention to the protection of the most vulnerable people.

While Intersos has been carrying out emergency programmes in Italy before, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is the first time it has responded to such an emergency situation in its home country. Using mobile teams, the organisation is focussing on migrants, seasonal workers, homeless and squatters, in several parts of the country, such as in Roma (in the Termini train station area) and in the South of the country. Shifting resources from regular overseas programmes to COVID-19 priorities is a significant challenge for Intersos, especially as the existing humanitarian needs (i.e. the ones that existed before this pandemic) did not go away with this new crisis. The pandemic has forced Intersos to change the way it carries out many of these activities, or even to suspend some group activities, for example in training centres and child friendly spaces in refugee camps. “This is the first major global emergency where we have to remain at home and where we cannot send staff to reinforce our operations overseas,” Moschochoritis said. “Our first priority now is the safeguarding of our staff and providing them with proper safety equipment, as well as to define our critical activities.”

Moschochoritis further explained: “We have entered a crisis management mode. If you have to choose, you promote life-saving and life-sustaining activities. So far, we have not reached this point. We are only at the beginning of this crisis. Reallocating resources from regular programmes to specific COVID-19 may look easy on paper. In practice it is highly challenging.” In terms of human resources, Moschochoritis stressed that there remain opportunities to recruit locally. He also noted that as soon as borders will open for medical and other relief supplies, Intersos will be able to scale up its operations with extra staff and supplies. This will be one solution as part of a bigger, more concerted response to this crisis.

Responding to a question about the current travel restrictions and frontier controls put in place because of COVID-19, Moschochoritis hinted at the blockage by and in a European country of vital medical supplies for Afghanistan, complicating the work of the NGO abroad. The Intersos SG also noted a specific side-effect that may facilitate Intersos’ work in some countries: While there remains a need to put humanitarian principles in practice, the current situation may also create opportunities. “It is providing access where we usually would not have access to. The pandemic is creating a particular situation of a need that can potentially break obstacles,” he said.

On the forecasts for humanitarian funding, Moschochoritis explained what he called his ‘wish’ and his ‘expectations’. “Much of the 2020 funding had been agreed before and should remain in place for the regular response. COVID-19 requires additional funding,” he noted. Unfortunately, he said, there may be reason for some pessimism as the IASC global Humanitarian Response Plan for the COVID19 pandemic is so far 20 per cent funded. The main concern, however, is the future funding from the traditional humanitarian donors that have also been heavily hit by the pandemic.

On the issue of the future implications of this pandemic for humanitarian aid, Moschochoritis noted that nothing will stay the same. “The localisation agenda should focus on complementarity instead of confrontation,” he said.

Full interview available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOLmyEG2KF0&feature=youtu.be>