

Slovak development cooperation in 2021

Daniel Kaba

The year 2021 brought several major milestones in the development cooperation sector both at home and abroad. Some implications are not clearly visible at first glance and still need to be unpacked and properly digested for future strategies and planning.

There were good reasons to believe that COVID-19 was a wake-up call and that the shock of the first pandemic year would be replaced by efforts – as the saying goes, no one is saved from COVID-19 unless we are all saved. However, the ability and willingness of the Slovak administration to reform the system, adopt new strategies, incorporate agility and lean management, proactively regroup capacities and test new tools and approaches turned out to be rather subdued.

The EU neighborhood and beyond proved to be more fragile than expected, with several crises looming or deepening that require a shift in the mindset and approach of the Slovak ODA architecture.

The end of 2021 marks the midterm of the current government, i.e. the period in which most reforms usually take place. The administration did of course have to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic; nonetheless its attempts at improvements should be considered in the light of the government manifesto.

Below ODA is considered from three different perspectives.

The first is the major external developments and humanitarian changes in the EU neighborhood and in SlovakAid partner countries and how these have shaped the Slovak development system. The second is how the Slovak aid architecture reacted and future implications. The third, more domestic perspective, is whether it is possible to break the action–reaction circle in order to create potential for a proactive systemic approach.

The article presents these three perspectives in relation to the following areas: ODA financing, COVID-19, geographic priorities and LDCs, fragility and humanitarian aid and civil society.

The author looks at the Irish case as it is a pioneer in focusing on LDCs and providing robust funding to and through NGOs, whilst being a similarly sized country to Slovakia in terms of population and territory – to name but a few reasons.

■ ODA financing: clutching at straws

In 2021 total Slovak spending on ODA equaled €127 million, or 0.13 per cent of GNI, with bilateral aid of €30 million. Although both figures seem ambitious, a closer look provides a more realistic picture.

Total aid is stagnating, which may be partly down to the COVID-19 economic impacts, but more worryingly the quality of the funding did not improve either. The funding is fragmented across many partner countries and there are no new tools or significant improvements in e.g. speed, flexibility and effectiveness.

The ratio slightly increased in favor of bilateral aid versus multilateral (24 per cent vs 76 per cent) but that is mostly financial contributions and has no positive implications for SlovakAid programs and projects. Disregarding the inflated aid (€0.9 million in in-donor refugee costs, €1 million in debt relief and COVID-19 related activities (€11.3 million), bilateral aid is only €16.8 million or 14 per cent of total aid. This imbalance not only stands out against the percentages for the majority of DAC OECD members but leaves the Slovak Republic with very limited space to significantly boost its international programs.

In contrast Ireland had a total spend of 53 per cent (€458 million) on bilateral aid in 2020 and 47 per cent (€409 million) on multilateral partners, showing that it is possible to balance the part that is the sole discretion of the donor state against its binding financial contributions to international organizations.

Table 1. Inflated aid components and genuine bilateral aid (in € million)

	2018	2019	2020	2021
In donor refugee costs	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.9
Imputed student costs	1.6	1.7	1.4	
Security	8.75			

Debt relief			16.6	0.96
Vaccines				11.3
Total inflated and vaccines	10.8	2.3	18.9	14.0
Genuine bilateral aid	17.5	17.0	14.5	16.0
Total bilateral aid	28.3	19.4	33.3	30.0

Let's have a look at Ireland's GNI and the nominal value of the ODA. In 2019 Ireland had a GNI of \$341 billion against Slovakia's \$174 billion, which is only twice the size, but the nominal value of total Irish ODA was seven times higher than for Slovakia, i.e. €867 million versus €127 million.

Table 2. Bilateral aid, multilateral aid and total aid (in € million)

	2019	2020	2021
Bilateral aid	19.4	33.3	30.0
Multilateral	84.24	90.1	97.4
EU	72.94	80.2	84.5
Others	11.3	10.9	12.9
Genuine total aid	101.2	105.6	113.4
Total aid	103.5	124.5	127.4
Total aid per cent GNI	0.11	0.14	0.13

Almost every year total aid remains at around the same level thanks to a different inflated aid component or non-systemic element. In 2021 it was vaccine donations.

The Slovak manifesto commitment was "to accelerate the increase in financial resources for bilateral development cooperation activities." But the Foreign Ministry, as Slovak ODA coordinator, still has no plan on the table for achieving this. Needless to say, the previous plan created in 2019 had been drawn up under the previous government and so was not binding, nor did it contain any practical actions and measures and it was adopted in totally different non-COVID-19 circumstances.

The state budget for 2021–2023 below offers a murky vision of future funding. There is also a question mark over the amount of funding under the Foreign Ministry.

Table 3. ODA State Budget (in € m)

	2021	2022	2023
Foreign Ministry/ SAIDC	8.9	7	7
Interior Ministry	1.9	1.9	1.9
Education Ministry	2.1	2	2.1
Finance Ministry	7.6	8.3	9

Source: "Zameranie dvojstrannej rozvojovej spolupráce SR na rok 2021," [Bilateral development cooperation in 2021] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2021, p. 14. Available online: <https://slovakaid.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Zameranie-ODA-SR-2021.pdf> (accessed on March 12, 2022).

■ COVID-19 – did anti-vaxxers unintentionally support ODA?

COVID-19 related activities totaled €11.3 million, of which vaccine donations account for €9.4 million.

According to the Foreign Ministry, Slovakia donated 1,810,00 vaccine doses (comprising 1,140,000 doses of Janssen, AstraZeneca or Moderna donated via COVAX at the recommended \$6.72 proxy price; 610,000 doses of AstraZeneca at a €2.90 unit price, donated bilaterally and 60,700 doses of Moderna at a €19.35 unit price, donated bilaterally).¹

As of December 31, 2021, only 2.7 million people had been vaccinated using 6.5 million doses (49 per cent of the population).²

On one side the ability of the Slovak Republic to share excess vaccines can be seen as a positive move. On the other hand the EU did not manage to change the intellectual property rights in order to enable vaccine production in the

¹ "Advance questionnaire on main ODA aggregates," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, March 27, 2022.

² "Our world in data." Available online: <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2021-12-26&facet=none&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&Metric=People+vaccinated+%28by+dose%29&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=true&Color+by+test+positivity=false&country=~SVK> (accessed on February 28, 2022).

Global South. Slovakia's position on this is not clear. How factors such as expiration date, use monitoring, a possible lack of syringes and so on affected the effectiveness of vaccine donations has yet to be explored.

The figures above show that the high proportion of unvaccinated people in Slovakia including anti-vaxxers contributed to the 7 per cent of total ODA, although the exact extent of this is difficult to measure. It could be a unique example of excess public goods being used as ODA and that creates mixed feelings.

The vaccine donations boosted the LDCs far up the SlovakAid OECD DAC reporting. The following section unpacks what happened to the geographic priorities, including the LDCs.

■ Geographic priorities: Phasing out or when push comes to shove?

This part depicts significant changes in the list of SlovakAid partner countries that deserve to be addressed in more detail. Why it is more accurate to present Ethiopia as a non-long-term planned decision and the journey in Afghanistan as letting an intervention slowly die out rather than the proper phasing-out that would be thoroughly justified and politically and financially backed up and what are the motivations for that?

At first glance the motivations appear simple – a combination of a complex worsening crisis and small donor resources spread thinly. A closer look reveals more pertinent issues such as the need to determine all of the following – identity, ambitions, goals, national interests, geographic distance, historical and cultural aspects, diaspora links and how the SlovakAid projects fits into the larger picture of the main donors (including the EU, be they joint programming, trust funds or more recently Team Europe Initiatives) – in relation to a given partner country.

The year was not only marked by the notorious evacuation of military and Western personnel from Kabul in August 2021 but was also a farewell for the SlovakAid endeavor in Afghanistan that had started in 2003. Although 20 years looks impressive on a timeline, the truth is that over the past ten years the SlovakAid presence had dwindled and was limited to a few micro-grants and a single project supported annually. With no embassy or resources to provide for the implementers and the deteriorating security situation on the ground it was probably an inevitable step.

Part of the motivations back then on the Slovak side can be linked to the war on terror led by the USA after 9/11 in 2001. Nonetheless one cannot exclude the possibility that Afghanistan may again receive financial aid in the future, but that will be mainly through UN organizations and on a small scale. Afghanistan started as a partner country, continued as a program country for two strategic cycles (ten years) and from 2019 onward was on the brink of being delisted.

In 2021 the SAIDC published zero calls for proposals for Afghanistan. There were several good projects by Slovak implementers, including NGOs, but the Slovak journey poses questions about how a donor like Slovakia should strategically choose work in a complex and remote crisis without prior historical attachments, with almost no diaspora and robust funding.

Some similarities as well as differences can be drawn in Ethiopia's case. The main difference is that unlike with Afghanistan there were some good reasons to expect the SlovakAid presence would grow, albeit slowly but steadily. It was only added to the list recently in 2019 (whole story here³) and was the only least developed (LDC) partner country in Africa with a Slovak embassy. The interest of the Slovak implementers, both NGOs and businesses, was increasing modestly and there were historical links with former Czechoslovakia. The security element is of a different essence from in Afghanistan – in general the risks are more acceptable for operating in. However, the conflict in Tigray and economic impact of COVID-19 on ODA finances may have outweighed the reasons for continuing.

Some of the last dregs of the official SlovakAid active approach to responding to the pressing humanitarian crisis in Tigray could be seen in the joint efforts of the Slovak NGOs' fundraising and awareness raising campaign "Together for Ethiopia" that ran in March and April. Close to €100,000 was raised including €20,000 provided by SlovakAid. Although initially planned as a matching fund, the Foreign Ministry's approach did not allow for the potential to be fully maximized.

The humanitarian crisis in Tigray was probably the death knell of the SlovakAid presence in in Egypt. At the end of 2021 the Foreign Ministry announced it would close down the Slovak embassy in Addis and remove Ethiopia from the partner country list.

³ Ethiopia was not among the partner countries in the first program cycle (2003–2008) but became one starting in 2009–2013, only to be delisted in 2014–2018 and then back in 2019–2023.

With some simplification we can conclude that the withdrawal from Afghanistan could have happened years ago, while the decision on Ethiopia could have been postponed and properly phased out.

Towards the end of the year the Foreign Ministry confirmed it would abandon the regional approach to Sub-Saharan Africa. Given that scarce resources are being fragmented over a number of countries, Tanzania, Uganda, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Eritrea are not expected to be seen on the list any time soon.

The lack of funding and fragmentation was stressed by the CSOs before the regional approach was adopted in 2019. Unless otherwise funded, SlovakAid decision projects could affect the scaling up potential and/or sustainability of projects.

The above not only means that Slovakia currently has no single LDC among its partners (with the exception of vaccine donations) but also that in general its focus has shifted even more onto Europe.

The case of Ireland shows that it is possible to focus on LDCs: nine out of the top ten IrishAid partner countries (in 2020) were: Ethiopia (€39.6 million), Mozambique (€25.7 million), Tanzania (€22.9 million), Uganda (€22.7 million), Malawi (€20.8 million), Sierra Leone (€14.6 million), Zimbabwe (€8.7 million), Palestine (€8.6 million), South Sudan (€8.6 million).⁴

The vaccines donated were worth €5.2 million, making the Slovak annual contribution to the LDCs probably one of the highest in its ODA history, although one can hardly see this as systemic and potentially replicable in the future.

On the other hand, keeping 24 explicit partner countries on the ODA list without a significant budget increase makes no sense for a small donor like Slovakia.

The Foreign Ministry made a move both toward the DAC OECD recommendations and a geographic focus in practical terms. It remains to be seen to what extent this was a strategic step or a mere reaction of the when push comes to shove type.

But part B remains open. So, after saying what we don't want to do and where we do not want to work, we need to take stock on what, where and how Slovakia wants to do its international cooperation. The debate on geographic

⁴ "Irish Aid. Annual Report 2020," Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 90. Available online: <https://www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/publications/Irish-Aid-Annual-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2022)

priorities (where) needs to be coupled with the question of the Slovak Republic's role in both humanitarian and development aid.

■ Fragility, resilience and humanitarian aid

Although the EU has been the world's leading humanitarian actor, providing some 36 per cent of global humanitarian assistance,⁵ the gap between humanitarian needs and the available funding has been increasing. According to UN OCHA over the past 10 years the number of people in need has increased dramatically from \$62 million to \$235 million.⁶

The EU vicinity and beyond is becoming more fragile and that is having an increasing effect on Slovakia.

Examples include the brutal oppression of civil society in Belarus, continuing with the refugee crisis artificially triggered by the Lukashenko regime on the Polish/Belarus border and the conflict in Donbas, Ukraine, continuing with minor skirmishes ravaging the lives of its inhabitants.

In the EU's southern neighborhood, Lebanon sank deeper into poverty with barely any reforms after a year-long political stalemate. After unsuccessful attempts by two designated prime ministers since the blast in Beirut port, the third prime minister designate in a row managed to form a government in the summer. Meanwhile in Ethiopia, a SlovakAid partner country, the horrendous conflict in Tigray took a high toll on the lives of civilians.

The evacuation of Western personnel from Kabul marked the end of the SlovakAid endeavor in Afghanistan. When it comes to irregular migration, according to Frontex, the total number of irregular arrivals in Europe via the Mediterranean route increased to 65,000 arrivals and via the Western Balkan route to 60,000 crossings.⁷

⁵ In 2020, the EU and member states combined allocated funding of €7.577 billion. See "Humanitarian aid contribution." Available online: <https://fts.unocha.org/> (accessed March 2, 2022)

⁶ See "Global Humanitarian overview 2021," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2021.

⁷ "EU external borders in 2021: Arrivals above pre-pandemic levels," Frontex, January 11. Available online: <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-in-2021-arrivals-above-pre-pandemic-levels-CxVMNN> (accessed March 4, 2022)

With fragility on the increase Slovakia needs to take stock on how it can adapt its policies to help its neighborhood become more resilient and to diminish the negative effects of conflicts, hybrid warfare, disinformation, climate change, economic and supply chain, energy dependency and refugee crises.

The experience in Afghanistan, the reaction to the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia, the change in the SlovakAid call for proposals on Ukraine from humanitarian to development aid pose serious questions about Slovakia's capacities and ambitions in humanitarian aid. Besides the lack of funding, one of the reasons the SlovakAid humanitarian quest in South Sudan seems to be coming to an end is the alleged limitation of having no presence on the ground and the complications of working from a distance from Nairobi. Having a presence in the field is indisputably an element that needs to be taken into consideration in the future strategy.

In 2021 SlovakAid allocated €1 million in humanitarian grants for Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. It is not clear why the COVID-19 humanitarian grants in 2020 were not repeated in 2021 nor has there been a proper explanation as to why the evaluation process that took ten days could not be replicated as a good lesson learnt.

The Slovak humanitarian aid system is outdated, with limited strategic, financial, personnel and expert capacities. The Mechanism of Humanitarian Aid document is from 2006 and does not reflect the current situation. Having a humanitarian aid strategy is among the goals of the Slovak medium-term strategy for development cooperation. At the end of 2020 the Foreign Ministry rightly created a working group under the ODA coordination committee and the first meeting took place in November 2020. That same year Ambrela presented its recommendations and published a participatory review of Slovak Humanitarian Aid. In the first half of 2021 the process slowed significantly with a working group lying idle.

The process resumed in September 2021 and in spite of the relatively intense meetings of the working group, the process has been affected by inter-ministerial misunderstandings about the process and structure of the strategy. The lack of facilitation and leadership contributed to too. The state of progress since December 2021 is unknown.

Although Slovakia cannot compete with other donors in terms of funding volume, it can work on identifying and building up its comparative advantage. This could potentially oscillate around three building blocks: overall rapid response, flexibility in project implementation and filling the gaps in the large stakeholder environment. In other words: small but quick and flexible

might be the way forward. Obviously this does not exclude a dialogue on what the sectoral or crosscutting focus could be.

As food for thought, the three examples below are worth exploring.

The Humanitarian Programme Plan (HPP) started by IrishAid in 2009 supports humanitarian interventions in situations of protracted, predictable and recurring crises and aims to strengthen the partnership with humanitarian NGOs and promote humanitarian responses that build resilience and lay the groundwork for sustainable development. It incorporates elements of preparedness, disaster risk reduction and early recovery.⁸

Another IrishAid scheme is the Emergency Response Fund Scheme (ERFS) founded in 2007. It pre-positions funds with participating NGOs at the beginning of the year to enable them to respond quickly and appropriately to humanitarian crises during the initial weeks after the onset of an emergency. Another added value besides the quick response is the financial leverage it can create. The ratio funding per project is €100,000 but since 2014 it has funded more than 200 humanitarian interventions in over 47 countries and provided funding worth over €21 million.⁹

Another example is the Start Fund¹⁰ – the first multi-donor pooled fund managed exclusively by NGOs. Although recently decentralized into several hubs that are geographically not overlapping with the SlovakAid partner countries the very idea of providing rapid financing to underfunded small to medium scale crises, spikes in chronic humanitarian crises, and acting in anticipation of impending crises and filling a critical gap in humanitarian financing may be worth exploring.

⁸ See more at “Humanitarian Programme Plan,” IrishAid. Available online: <https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/responding-to-emergencies/ngofunding/> (accessed March 5, 2022)

⁹ See more at “Emergency Response Fund Scheme (ERFS),” IrishAid. Available online: <https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/responding-to-emergencies/ngofunding/> (accessed March 5, 2022)

¹⁰ The Start Fund is collectively owned and managed by Start Network’s members, and supported by the governments of the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Jersey and the IKEA Foundation. Projects are chosen by local committees, made up of staff from Start Network members and their partners, within 72 hours of an alert. This makes the Start Fund the fastest, collectively-owned, early response mechanism in the world. For more see: <https://startnetwork.org/start-fund> (accessed March 4, 2022)

■ Civil society and the SlovakAid partnership

Civil society and NGOs are a longstanding SlovakAid partner. In 2021 they ran programs and projects in more than 30 countries but they also faced multiple challenges such as, but not limited to, the COVID-19 impact on their operations and effects on fundraising capacities.

In January and February, the SAIDC published 11 calls for proposals with a total allocation of €4.3 million. The majority of the implementers are NGOs. In 2021, 21 grantees started 47 projects in 16 SlovakAid partner countries.

However, in the 2013–2021 year-on-year comparison, there was no significant increase in the grant budget for NGOs, although total aid increased from €64 million to €127 million and bilateral aid went from €12 million to €30 million. This is undoubtedly the Achilles heel in the SlovakAid and NGO partnership.

Compared to 2020, when there was an exceptional increase in the grant budget, this represents a decrease of approximately €1.24 million (21.83 per cent). The planned grant budget versus real spending ratio in the calls for proposals improved annually as follows: €4.3 million versus €4 million in 2021 and €5.6 million versus €4.6 million in 2020.

It is not clear how the Foreign Ministry reallocate funds from NGO accessible grants to financial contributions nor to what extent the Annual Bilateral Aid Program budget can be relied on or how binding it is.

Similarly, no one knows how the grant budget is reallocated among calls for proposals. Last year an extra €250,000 was relocated to the Western Balkans (six unapproved applications) but not to e.g. Ukraine (12 unapproved project applications).

The grant budget for Kenya, a program country, is continually being decreased. It reached €500,000 (of seven applications three were approved). The maximum budget decreased from €250,000 to €200,000 only.

On the positive side the grant budget was not reduced in light of the COVID-19 economic impact.

In Ireland 22 per cent (€187 m) of total ODA was channeled to and through NGOs in 2020. This is in stark contrast to less than 4 per cent of funding being

channeled through Slovak NGOs in 2021. Core support from IrishAid to NGOs equals €92 million versus €0.05 million from SlovakAid. IrishAid project type interventions amounted to €141 million.

■ Conclusion

Although painful for some implementers, reducing the partner country list to 14 countries was necessary to avoid Slovak ODA crumbling away.

Two essential ingredients are consistency and predictability.

The geographic consistency is illustrated by Ethiopia: it was not among the partner countries in the first programmatic cycle (2003–2008), became one in 2009–2013, only to be delisted in 2014–2018 and back on again in 2019–2023. Now it is off the list.

In terms of tools it would be extremely helpful if the Slovak Republic could position itself as a modern donor with a flexible rapid onset humanitarian cycle. When it comes to reforming the humanitarian system this does not necessarily imply a huge increase in funding.

The whole development cooperation community needs genuine bilateral aid funding to be increased. A very useful first step would be to create and approve a realistic plan for increasing the Slovak development cooperation budget.

It would also be worth exploring whether it is possible to systematically link Slovakia's bilateral and multilateral development cooperation, so there is more of a connection between its activities and the EU and other EU member states' activities, be that in TEI or the new 2021–2027 program cycle.

Last but not least, a very practical and welcome step would be to introduce a strategic dialogue, based on data and evaluations and focused on results, with the main actors of development cooperation in the Slovak Republic so everyone is clear on the priorities for the given year, how these will be achieved and so continuous progress tracking can be put in place.

Table 4. Effects of policy and management decisions on the Slovak ODA system

deterioration	damage control	improvement
No Strategy on Humanitarian Aid	No significant cuts to the SlovakAid grants	SAIDC signed an agreement to implement its first EU delegated cooperation project in Moldova. This will be the very first EU delegated cooperation project for SAIDC and the agency will be the lead partner.
Humanitarian capacities not boosted		Focus on human rights and democracy in public discourse and PR by the MFA
10 day evaluation period of humanitarian projects not replicated from 2020		Timeline of SAIDC calls for proposals published beforehand
No call for strategic partnerships		Pre-deployment consultations between diplomats and CSOs
Slovak commitment to 0.33 per cent GNI increasingly threatened		Mid-term evaluation of the 5 year Strategy for development
No institutional or core support for NGOs to counterbalance COVID-19 impacts		Visits by the State Secretary to Lebanon, Moldova and Georgia
Inflated aid and vaccines accounting for 18 per cent of total ODA		Results of (un)successful applications published
No LDC project/ program country		
CSO mandatory matching not canceled or diminished in spite of economic impacts of Covid-19		
No clear explanation on merging development cooperation and economic diplomacy into one section at the MFA		
No analysis on ODA business		
No plan for ODA business		
No ODA report presentation to parliament		

