

COVID-19: Why EU solidarity should extend to its neighbours

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Senior Researcher, CIDOB
[@solerlecha](#)



How will the coronavirus crisis affect the European Union's relationship with its neighbours? What scope exists for the EU to help the countries in its southern neighbourhood and work on tackling the problem together? Europe must modify its priorities and incorporate this new situation into its relations with the countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa.

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The coronavirus crisis has led EU countries to redirect their political attention and available resources towards managing the health crisis and thinking about how to mitigate its economic, social and political effects. Such urgency may obscure one strategic consideration: the necessary reorientation of its policy towards neighbouring countries and the risks of not doing so. Rather than being limited to its most immediate surroundings, this effort should extend to the entire African continent with which the EU was preparing, in 2020, to launch a new bi-continental cooperation framework. Ten years ago, the EU made the mistake of neglecting events beyond its borders and ended up suffering deferred consequences. Has it learned its lesson?

A few years ago, I had a lengthy discussion with a European politician who was on the front line when the 2008 economic crisis broke out and reached in Europe in the form of a sovereign debt crisis. The politician spoke bitterly about how little time European leaders had in 2011 to concern themselves with events on the other side of the Mediterranean and to articulate an ambitious, joint response to the winds of change beginning to blow through the Arab world. Countries acted alone and, the politician lamented, at the EU level all efforts were concentrated on solving the European crisis, negotiating the Greek bailout, mitigating the risks of contagion or worse, the bankrupting of the European project. There was neither the time nor the resources for anything else. How could we forgive debt or multiply aid to our neighbours when we were giving Greece loans at abusive interest rates and calling it help, the politician added. Shortly afterwards, in 2015, the eyes of European leaders turned towards the Mediterranean again, not out of solidarity or a desire to offer companionship, but to protect themselves from potential tremors reaching them from their neighbours' instability. The so-called migration crisis in the eastern Mediterranean and the terrorist attacks in several European capitals showed that inaction had consequences and that by focussing only on home for so long, they hadn't noticed the neighbourhood was on fire.

To understand how COVID-19 could destabilise the EU's Mediterranean and African neighbours, it is necessary to identify different forms of vulnerability. First, the vast majority of these countries have fragile health infrastructure and the human and pharmaceutical resources for dealing with the emergency are scarce. Morocco, for example, has a third of the hospital beds per inhabitant that Spain does, and Egypt has six times fewer than France. The situation is even more critical when it comes to intensive care, with Sub-Saharan African data particularly alarming. Burkina Faso, one of the African countries worst affected by the pandemic so far, has only 11 respirators for a population of 19 million. Brain-drain is an additional factor, with healthcare one of the sectors worst hit by this phenomenon across the continent: over the past decade it is estimated that every day one doctor trained in Africa has migrated to the United States. Many countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean will have great difficulty acquiring the medical equipment needed to manage the pandemic in a speculative global market, and will find themselves relying on opportunistic or altruistic donations, something that is even more true in Sub-Saharan Africa. Countries and territories such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and the Gaza Strip deserve special mention, as their infrastructures – including health infrastructure – are in ruins after years of violence.

Some of these countries may believe that although their health systems are precarious, they may better withstand the pandemic thanks to their younger populations, warmer climates – which may reduce the risk of contagion – and because they introduced containment measures when the number of cases were not as high as in southern Europe. All of that remains to be corroborated, but even if it turns out to be true, the economic consequences will not be avoided. The countries that rely most on trade with Europe will be hard-hit, such as those in the Maghreb, where in some cases export dependence on the EU market is as high as 70%. Worse, their main clients tend to be Spain, France and Italy, three of the most severely affected countries in both health and economic terms. The vulnerability has also increased because the crisis is devastating sectors like tourism, energy and maritime traffic, which are vital for many of the EU's neighbours. Before the spread of COVID-19, tourism and travel, including indirect economic activities, formed a major part of the GDP of countries such as Morocco (8%), Tunisia (8%), Egypt (11%) and Turkey (12%). In Algeria, 60% of the state budget derives from the export of natural gas and oil, while in 2019 Egypt received \$5.8 billion for rights of way on the Suez Canal. Some Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Senegal, Kenya and Tanzania, are similarly reliant on tourism, and budget stability in countries like Nigeria and Angola depends on fluctuations in energy markets. What is more, for some of these countries the effects of the pandemic are less than those of other equally devastating threats such as the locust infestation that is destroying much of the harvest in East Africa.

It should be added that the economic consequences of this crisis will not affect everyone equally. Arab countries already had some of the world's highest youth unemployment rates, and several countries in the Middle East and Africa are among the world's most unequal. Protection measures in the form of confinement and quarantine mechanisms are especially hard for some groups, such as refugees crowded into camps or substandard housing. Another particularly large segment of the population is made up of families who depend on income from the informal economy and presently have no savings, no social protection network and no more support than that provided by neighbourhood solidarity networks and charities.

Certain countries and specific groups are highly dependent on international development cooperation, but drastic cuts in this field were a side effect of the last economic crisis. A country like Spain, for example, went from allocating 0.46% of its gross national income to international cooperation in 2011 to just 0.12% in 2015. Declines in contributions from major donors would be especially grave at the moment given the United Nations had warned before the start of the year that an estimated 168 million people in 59 different countries would require humanitarian aid in 2020. An added factor is that border closures will hinder the movement of aid workers, including medical personnel.

Finally, civil society organisations and figures that were already on the radar of repressive mechanisms in authoritarian systems will find themselves more vulnerable. The use of beefed-up surveillance mechanisms under the pretext of reducing the spread of the epidemic will limit the expression of collective unrest in the streets and increase surveillance of specific individuals. Another type of repression occurs within the family home. In Turkey, for example, the police and feminist organisations have reported rising cases of violence against women. No data from other countries in the region exists, but the situation may be the same or worse.

In light of all this, the EU must modify its priorities and incorporate this new situation into its neighbourhood relations and, more broadly, into its external action. It is worth remembering that Article 8 of the EU Treaty says that a close and cooperative relationship will be established with neighbouring countries, and that the 2016 European Global Strategy identified a need to increase the resilience of the states and societies in our neighbourhood. What is more, at the end of 2019 the flag was raised of a more geopolitical Europe and, just a few days before panic broke out in the old continent, the Commission and the High Representative made their Africa strategy public. 2020 was also meant to be the year Euro-Mediterranean relations would be updated and enhanced, taking advantage of the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process. Among the many decisions European leaders will have to make in the coming weeks is whether to give all this up or give it new meaning, adapting priorities and instruments to a reality that is very different to what they imagined in early 2020.

First it must be understood that the image of EU disunity displayed during the first phase of the pandemic has damaged not only its internal but also its external reputation. This is therefore the first thing to correct, followed by measures to mitigate economic damage and underpin the reconstruction of European economies. The high level of (inter)dependency means the EU's economic recovery is one of the most effective ways to cushion the blow of this crisis for its neighbours. A failure to do so would perpetuate and spread the crisis in its neighbourhood.

Alongside these duties at internal level, foreign policy and cooperation priorities and instruments will have to be adapted. Effectiveness first and foremost comes from asking your neighbours what they need and designing responses accordingly. But it can already be anticipated that some will have difficulties purchasing basic equipment. The EU might consider early joint procurement initiatives or sharing surpluses with those in need. Using the EU delegations and cooperation programmes already in place, the agility will be needed to devote greater attention to the most vulnerable groups (informal economy, victims of gender violence, a critical civil

society, among many others). And since this crisis coincides with the negotiation of the next EU budget, it is a good time to demand funding for external action that is up to the challenges. Additionally, EU-wide economic recovery plans in areas such as sustainable tourism, green reindustrialisation policies, and the promotion of science and research, should be open to the participation of neighbouring countries.

European countries and institutions could also partner with their Mediterranean and African neighbours and other countries around the globe to demand that the vaccines and medication developed be universally accessible and reasonably priced. These demands should not be confined to COVID-19 but extended to other diseases that have particularly serious impacts in Africa. International mechanisms must also be coordinated to better prevent similar emergency situations from recurring or at least to better foresee them and mitigate their effects. Along these lines, the EU could use cooperation frameworks such as the bi-continental dialogue with the African Union, the Union for the Mediterranean and the Euro-Arab Dialogue to articulate multilateral cooperative responses with its direct and more distant neighbours in the Global South in order to handle a challenge that transcends the health sphere.

These days, experts and intellectuals warn us how easy it is to set up false dilemmas and how difficult it is to dismantle them so as not to be forced to choose between health and the economy or between security and privacy. We must avoid adding a third false dilemma to the list: one that invites us to choose between internal and external solidarity.