# Global health and development as an interdisciplinary and intercultural opportunity for interuniversity cooperation
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**ABSTRACT**

Global Health (GH) is an emerging area of study, research and interdisciplinary practices which considers the effects of globalization on health, having the ultimate objective of achieving equity in the pursuit of health for all, with particular attention to health determinants and issues, transnational health initiatives, and their interactions with national and local systems. Thanks to the work of the Italian Global Health Watch (OISG), GH related courses were pushed forward in a growing number of Italian medicine and health science faculties and the Italian Network for Education in Global Health Education (RIISG) was established. GH teaching in non-health faculties is less common, though in these contexts, the interdisciplinary nature of the approach becomes more evident. GH courses in non-health faculties are carried out in the Faculty of Sociology (Master's course in Programming and Management of Social Policies) at Bicocca University, where a GH course was introduced for the first time in Italy since 2001, and at Bocconi University, where it is taught in English and offered internationally, both at the SDA Bocconi School of Management since 2002 and in the undergraduate program of economics since 2010. In the context of a partnership project between different universities financed by Fondazione CARIPLO, in the academic year 2010-2011, Bicocca University inaugurated a 160 hours bilingual workshop, taught simultaneously in Italian and Spanish. Professors and students (20) had a diverse background (sociology, anthropology, medicine, economics, political science, informatics, statistics, intercultural communication, psychology, and public health) and were evenly distributed between Italians and Latinamericans from universities in Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Italy, and Nicaragua. The experience, which contributed to the consolidation of the pre-existing collaborations and fostered new ones, demonstrated, among other things, the ease of interactions between the participants, without resorting to systematic translation or to a third, working language (i.e. English). Through an interdisciplinary and intercultural approach, it offered new, extraordinary opportunities of learning and human progress. The workshop, in turn, inserts into a program of action research which offers to the students and professors of the participating universities a chance to interact, also through fieldwork, in the context of integrated local development activities, collaborating with institutional actors and civil society organizations. In particular, the action research project between Universities and local communities has seen the first, experimental interdisciplinary investigation, conducted in the Barrio Carlo Fonseca a Managua, which involved students and professors of Bicocca and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua, with the contribution of all departments and all faculties of the latter university to the design and implementation of the project. The program of the Interuniversity and Intercultural Network, foresees that this experience, along with that of the workshop in Bicocca, could extend to all the universities of the network and their territories, under the broad idea that the universities should increasingly act as agents for local development.

## INTRODUCTION

As widely documented, health (or ill-health) is widely influenced by determinants, policies and interventions outside the traditional domain of the health sector and its actors.

The relevance of public policies in other sectors conceived with health impacts in mind is well recognized and has also been recently introduced into the global political agenda, including that of the G8. Thus, it is of great importance to ensure adequate awareness and training in global health for professionals who have or will have responsibilities in educational, social, economic, and environmental policy-making and management, or be involved in international relations, just to mention a few examples. According to Richard Horton, "Global health is becoming a critical part of the educational, research and moral mission of the university" [1].

Health promotion in times of globalization indeed requires new languages and a new health paradigm. It requires professionals with the appropriate competence and attitude for the newly defined domain "global health".

Global Health (GH) is an emerging area of study, research and interdisciplinary practices which considers the effects of globalization on health, having the ultimate objective of achieving equity in the pursuit of health for all, with particular attention to health determinants and issues, transnational health initiatives, their interdependence and their interactions with national and local systems. This approach, supported by valuable studies, faces strong resistance within the conventional academic culture and medical research which is strongly influenced by a scientific culture oriented by a technological, biomedical approach, focused on the development of marketable products, rather than interdisciplinary preventive measures based on correcting social determinants of ill-health.

Several courses have been activated in the domain of health sciences and in public health schools while educational opportunities in global health-related issues for individuals in non-health disciplines are still relatively limited internationally. Notwithstanding its early start, Italy is no exception.

Nevertheless, positive changes have been observed, also thanks to the work of the Italian Global Health Watch (OISG) active since almost ten years and strongly engaged in the promotion of training in the field of Global Health over the past years [2].

**Global Health training for health professionals**

The availability of educational opportunities offered by 36 Italian Health Faculties over the period 2007 to 2010 was recently assessed. The study, which included any course considered to be directly related to global health according to predefined inclusion criteria conferring at least one ECTS, showed an increasing offer (40 courses in 2010) and quality of teaching content over the period [3].

In addition, short courses in Global health are increasingly being offered in Italy by the National Health Service under the Continuous Education in Medicine (Educazione Continua in Medicina - ECM) program for health professionals.

**Global Health as part of non-health Disciplines**

When extending the analysis of Global Health teaching to non-health faculties, the variety of contents proposed under that denomination is confirmed. Similarly, there are courses whose contents reflect global health but do not have 'global health' in the title of these courses. Considering the extensiveness and complexity of the issues, as well as the need for an interdisciplinary approach, a nearly comprehensive course on Global Health would require at least a full-year duration; in that sense the possibly most advanced experience in Italy is the MIHMEP master course at Bocconi University mentioned below.

In any way, the first Global Health course to be introduced in a non health Faculty, and possibly the first Global Health course ever taught in an Italian university as part of the core study program, has been introduced by the authors and taught since 2001 in a specialization course in Policies and Management of Social Services (PROGEST) at the Faculty of Sociology at Milan Bicocca University, which was later reclassified as Master of Science in the context of the Bologna process. The course, titled "Global Policies for Health" was also made accessible to students from all faculties, with the faculty of Psychology being the first to propose it to its students.

Since 2002 two Global Health-related courses (Global Strategies for Health; Policy and Management in Developing Countries) have been systematically taught at Bocconi University School of Management in Milan, as part of the Master in International Healthcare Management Economics and Policy (MIHMEP). Starting 2010, these courses were integrated into a certified specialization called Global Health and Development, totalling 120 hours. The specialization, which also includes other courses specifically looking at the management of Global Health challenges, international consultancy and project management, also deepens the analysis of Health Systems and evidence-based policy-making in low-resource countries.

In the same year, Bocconi University also introduced a 48-hour (6 ECTS credits) elective introductory course in Global Health and Development for economics and management BA students in their final year. This was the very first introduction of Global Health to undergraduate students outside health sciences.

It is only recently that a few other faculties, all in northern Italy, initiated similar courses mostly within Master of Science programs, among others at the Universities of Milano (Department of Economical, Managerial and Statistical Sciences), Padua (Political Sciences) and Trieste (Development Cooperation) [4].

The experience that represents the focus of this work is largely based on the competence build-up over the years at the Bicocca and Bocconi Universities in Milan and a result of their partnership in a Global Health project supported by Fondazione CARIPLO.

**THE BILINGUAL WORKSHOP**

In the context of a partnership project between different universities financed by Fondazione CARIPLO, in the academic year 2010-2011, Bicocca University inaugurated a 160 hours bilingual workshop, taught simultaneously in Italian and Spanish. Professors and students (20) had a diverse background (sociology, anthropology, medicine, economics, political science, informatics, statistics, intercultural communication, psychology, and public health) and were evenly distributed between Italians and Latinamericans from universities in Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Italy, and Nicaragua. The experience contributed to the consolidation of the pre-existing collaborations and fostered new ones. Among other things, it demonstrated the ease of interactions between the participants, without resorting to systematic translation or to a third, working language (i.e. English). Through an interdisciplinary and intercultural approach, it offered new, extraordinary opportunities of learning and human progress.

**ACTION RESEARCH FIELDWORK**

The workshop, in turn, inserts into an action-research programme which offers to the students and professors of the participating universities a chance to interact, also through fieldwork, in the context of integrated local development activities, collaborating with institutional actors and civil society organizations.

The programme, based on a partnership agreement between the universities Bicocca and UNAN, was born from the encounter between a variety of disciplinary and professional experiences and aims at developing a new approach to global health in Latinamerica.

It is interesting to note that the proyect develops from an initial successful partnership, established since 1986, in between the Paediatric department of the Bicocca University Faculty of Medicine, directed by professor Giuseppe Masera, and the La Mascota Hospital in Managua which brought to the sustainable establishment of a Paediatric Oncology Centre in that Nicaraguan hospital.

Based on that experience and that fruitful relationship, the pilot action-research project in Managua's Barrio Carlos Fonseca was initiated, aiming at extending the experience to an increasing number of communities in Nicaraguan and possibly to other Latinamerican countries. The project integrates global health teaching, thus the analysis of transnational processes and decisions that influence health

globally and their interaction with national and local health systems, to the interdisciplinary and intercultural experience, involving all the Faculties of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN) and for the Bicocca University the Faculties of Medicine, Sociology, Statistical Sciences, Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences, The Bocconi University is also involved with its Center for Research in Health and Social care management (CERGAS).

The experimental interdisciplinary investigation, conducted in the Barrio Carlos Fonseca, involved students and professors of Bicocca and UNAN universities, with the contribution of all departments and all faculties of the latter to the design and implementation of the project.

The adopted methodological approach is based on both a local and an international dimension. The first coordinated by an Interdisciplinary Experimental Workshop, and the second one based on systematic interchange between partner universities.

Global health issues are analysed with an interdisciplinary focus and an integral approach toward the multiplicity of determinants of health and life conditions of the population and the complexity of their interactions.

UNAN's interdisciplinary workshop collaborates with the national government, the metropolitan municipality of Managua, local Institutions, health and social services, NGOs, volunteer and community organizations, in order to promote synergies, optimize resources and improve public policies.

The idea of a pilot project, with flexible project modules of an integral intervention on the field, justifies the adoption of participatory approaches involving the local community, which is no more the beneficiary of those interventions, but the main actor in the search for an better quality of life.

The role of the University as a development agent in society, interacting with citizens and institutions, is strengthened by research activity, interaction, sensitization, education, training and capacity building, professional apprenticeship and participatory field projects.

The above mentioned program of the Interuniversity and Intercultural Network, foresees that this experience, along with that of the bilingual workshop in Bicocca, may extend to all the universities of the network and their constituencies, under the broad idea that universities should increasingly act as agents for local development.

It is important to emphasize how universities progressively rising number of tasks makes them increasingly important as *agents for local development* [5, 6]. Therefore the university is measured not only on the basis of quality of knowledge and human capital, but also on the level of embedded social capital within a certain region. Value is added in those contexts where suitable skills resulting from constant investment in university education and professional qualification are useful. Universities should increasingly become the in which people (even those from abroad, and quite far away) can come together, ask questions, make demands and offer experiences. These social and professional practices pass through the university arena and return to their origins enriched by the exchange of new perspectives. These ideas that come from places of action and from dynamic collectivities *outside,* stimulate the *inside* through continuous co-mingling with critical practice and knowledge that foster change with a view toward action research. Thus the university becomes a meeting ground for theories and practices that produce knowledge by placing different forms of understanding in dialog with each other and build connections while maintaining difference.

This is a vision of the university as a critical conscience of society that, perhaps, even requires a rethinking of the role of professors as intellectuals and generators of doubt rather than certainty [7], who base themselves on scientific knowledge that by nature is open to change and thus relative and provisional. Unfortunately this has lead many to think that since research is in continuous progress, then nothing could be defined as "scientific" or "certain", in everyday language. In some parts of the world, and prominently in the U.S.A., the idea of evolution, for instance, is still debated as a belief, an opinion, and not as substantiated scientific theory by a good number of people. The relativity of science needs to be associated with the idea of cumulative knowledge and experience which is a distinctive trait of academic higher education.

A critical approach brings about a profitable exchange of ideas and experiences, which is made more prolific by the fact that different cultures have different ways to interpret facts and problems and that free exchange and discussion of different points of view enriches each perspective. This is a behaviour we can call ethnorelativism [8], an ability to recognize the value of other cultures and take other perspectives into consideration, thus transforming one's own perspective and arriving at a construction of a new perspective.

## UNIVERSITIES AS AGENTS OF CO-OPERATION

It seems urgent to revise the notion of the current culture of co-operation as an uneven balance between haves and haves not. The contribution universities can bring to this discussion is an important one; even more so if they become part of this "new culture" of co-operation. Their role should remain one of training and research on the one hand, but also one of systematizing various inputs coming from social actors on the field, both locally and internationally. For instance, collecting anecdotal information from local communities in their interaction with co-operation agents and reframe them into more theoretical coherent perspectives would be an important task that would support a different direction in working with developing contexts: it would mean a more accurate and perhaps replicable intervention. More so, it would support a logic of reciprocity and exchange. In a perspective of economical de-growth, there is much more to learn about, say, recycling and self-sustainment from countries like Cuba than from the United States, but one can find this in project reports, rarely in academic literature. Activating resources for the systemization of information and inputs would create nomothetic data that could make experiences comparable and interventions transferable. Transferability of theories and practices is a topic that has in fact not received enough attention in the international co-operation literature. After the demises of several aid projects from the Sixties on, there has been an awareness of the inadequacy of the transfer of technology from richer to poorer countries, but there is still little awareness that behaviours and practices can also not be transferred from one cultural context to another, unless they are reprocessed and revised within a different cultural framework. Not only a project should be seen through the eyes of the so called recipient, but also through a perspective which takes into account the interaction between this subject and an outsider (once donor) in a dynamic of exchange. This implies an intercultural competence which is often a

neglected subject in many professional trainings for co-operation. At best, students are prepared to deal with their own emotional changes which might occur when shifting cultural context, but not enough is being done to stress the importance of recognizing differences, accepting them for what they are, work through and with them in order to construe a mutual achievable goal and prepare a setting for reciprocal learning between stakeholders.

There is space for the training and qualification in this regard of both students, faculties and staff of higher education institutions that are dealing with decentralized co-operation. Most of the exchange programs between have the underlying philosophy that is the contact itself between people and organization to promote the recognition and appreciation of differences, stretching to the ability to work together as partners or team members. Research shows that contact with cultural differences without preparation is bound to reinforce stereotypes and divisions [9]. Nevertheless very little has been done to compensate this deficiency in exchange programs, which are, at present, the core of many efforts for internationalizing universities and often considered almost the essential component of a Global Health training in medical education, especially in North America [10].

We propose here the creation of a model of a Transnational and Intercultural Network of Universities (TINU) in which this concept can be implemented. The TINU should involve 1) local communities where they are based and/or communities where development projects have been set; 2) researchers both from academic settings and from agencies operating in a territory; 3) students, possibly from different contexts and/or countries; 4) faculties and staff of universities and different organizations. The idea is to have an interconnected process of learning among these subjects which all would share a platform of common language about the recognition of differences and of their potential, about the ability to process intercultural ethical issues and about the capacity of transferability. This would create a communal competence that would allow the network to operate at a level of technical and humanistic performance that would support the creation of new models of respectful interventions and creative modelling of research and applications.

This approach can be a different approach to internationalization that can foster, at least in this domain of studies, a true ethnorelative mindset. It is through an ethnorelative perspective that the idea of partnership can assume the meaning it was evoked for, in the sharing of goals and the creation of third cultures [11] which encompass values, behaviours, communication styles and cognitive styles of the actors. Internationalization therefore is seen here not as a way to make our universities a more cosmopolitan place seasoned with some political correctness and a few courses taught in a different language, but as a way to prepare new citizens for an enlarged world. A world which demands more responsibility not only for a sustainable physical environment, but also for a more sustainable social environment in which intercultural competence becomes a central piece of people's education to guarantee autonomy of development and mutual learning.

## DEVELOPMENT AND CO-OPERATION

One of the principal issues of cooperation is the very ambiguity of the concept of development, which in prevalent interpretations, seems to have little to do with the quality of life of communities, the needs of populations or regional resources.

In the years following World War II, development became synonymous with growth and economic wealth, and cooperation came to mean financial and technical aid from 'Northern' countries (the so-called donor countries) toward countries in the 'South' of the world (so-called recipient countries). This has brought about a perverse relationship between donor and recipient countries. The ever-expanding culture of assistance has become more exclusionary and impedes recipient individuals and communities from taking on active and reciprocal roles using their own resources and capacities. Since the '90s, however, (at the international conferences in Rio de Janeiro on the environment, in Vienna on human rights, in Cairo on population, in Beijing on gender, in Istanbul on habitat, in Rome on food and in Copenhagen on social development) international cooperation has tried to confront important topics like poverty, unemployment and social marginalization with the goal of signalling ways to make development more fair and humane [12].

Still, it is obvious that development results from a complex process involving different social agents and that marginalization is a logical consequence of the means of production in certain societies and times in history. It is thus insufficient to add adjectives to the term 'development' such as sustainable, local, community, participatory, integrated, lasting, alternative, etc. – to contrast the competitive logic that sustains the still primary idea of development as continual economic growth. It is necessary to build or reconstruct a critical culture that is able to question the very content of development and that can strive to create a society based on quality of life rather than quantity, on cooperation rather than competition, on reduction rather than accumulation and limitless consumption [13].

If cooperation is in crisis, it is because it is based on ideologies and intervention models that come from the end of World War II, which are inadequate today from a social and ethical point of view. From an ethical point of view, more than half a century of experience has shown that cooperation is still unevenly weighed in favour of donor countries and functions toward their economic and ideological hegemony. This contributes to the widening gap between rich and poor rather than reducing it. From a social point of view, the application of a Western model of cooperation shows "exclusionary strategies of competition" [14] in which some fight for dominance over others in an international context of dramatic change in power relationships between no longer hegemonic countries and emerging ones.

Given this, how can we open up a space of critical comparison on ideas and practices of change in which cooperation can take on the role of a research laboratory? A concrete possibility lies in taking the local community as an example. The local community is made up of a strong synergy among a region, a population and a government that represents it. It is the level of organization best placed to strive for a better quality of life and to respond meaningfully to the collective needs of the population. The local community seems to be the level for a de-centralized cooperation model which favours people's direct and active participation in decision-making through suitable processes.

Furthermore, a critical approach must totally abandon the still wide-spread idea and practice that cooperation happens between donor and recipient countries and should be based on a nexus among regions, partnerships and constructive

relationships between different cultural agents who acknowledge each other through the *work of cooperation*. A famous example of direct democracy is the Brazilian "participatory budget" experience in Porto Alegre. This was a grass-roots assembly of citizens' groups, neighborhood groups, grass-roots committees, etc. in which the local population decided where and how to dedicate community funds to improve quality of life. The goals of this grass-roots participation are to fairly distribute resources and to build a regional regulatory panel compatible with the demands and needs of the local population.

This experience allowed the building of the New Municipium Network's Declaration Charter at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (January 2002) and at the European Social Forum in Florence (November 2002). The Charter was promoted and discussed under the initiative of researchers based at universities in Florence, Bologna, Milan, Rome and Venice. A large number of local Italian authorities and citizens' associations have so far subscribed to the Charter. A network of associations of local authorities and researchers has been set up with the aim of implementing the Charter's contents. "The new municipium produces new social scenarios by recognizing deeply rooted living and working practices of inhabitants originally from different countries and paces. This process produces new community relationships at a social and individual level between different people and cultures. The public space in particular is where many new and culturally different living practices are shared" [15].

"This perspective in local development, identified with civic networks' and the growth of fair government for local societies, must not become narrowly local; on the contrary, new networks as alternatives to global ones must be built, grounded in local differences, for non-hierarchical and non-instrumental cooperation" [16].

Building these local societies' fair networks can be defined as a *bottom-up co-operation*, which is also a world strategic network. This project, through the participation of Local Social Forums and Local Governments, has started building this new form of co-operation.

Taking the region as a system implies considering it as a seat of continuously transforming integration processes between nature and culture, and as a place of exchange among different communities. Such a practice requires an intercultural approach that acknowledges these differences and can put their synergy and complementarity to good use. This can only happen if we restore the etymological meaning of the word co-operation, *to operate jointly* understanding that mutual aid allows for a better solution to communities problems.

Therefore, the goal of a decentralised co-operation process is to construct a complex exchange network among communities and universities. These exchanges, understood as action-research workshops, allow comparisons of culture and different experiences as well as trials of possible alternative solutions through intercultural projects that stimulate positive change.

## CONCLUSIONS

Defining health as a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, we implicitly recognise the multifactorial nature of good health, thus the unavoidable need for an interdisciplinary approach in the elaboration and implementation of health related policies and interventions, thus in the education of future professional whose decisions and practice will influence population's health: both health and non health professionals. Recognizing the influence of globalization implies extending the scope of the analysis, and consequently of the action beyond national borders and processes. However, it also implies recognising the increasing global interdependence and interconnectedness, allowing for intensive interaction and interchange of ideas and experience between distant local communities and their institutions. As our experience shows, in the common search of appropriate solutions for health, the intercultural encounter offers a unique opportunity for interuniversity cooperation.

## NOMENCLATURE

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| CERGAS | Center for Research on Health and Social Care Management |
| ECN | Educazione Continua in Medicina (Continuous Education in Medicine) |
| ECTS | European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System |
| MIHMEP | Master in International Healthcare Management Economics and Policy |
| OISG | Osservatorio Italiano sulla Salute Globale (Italian Global Health Watch) |
| PROGEST | Corso di laurea magistrale in Programmazione e Gestione delle politiche dei servizi sociali (Master of Science in Policies and Management of Social Services) |
| TINU | Transnational and Intercultural Network of Universities |
| UNAN | Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua |

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