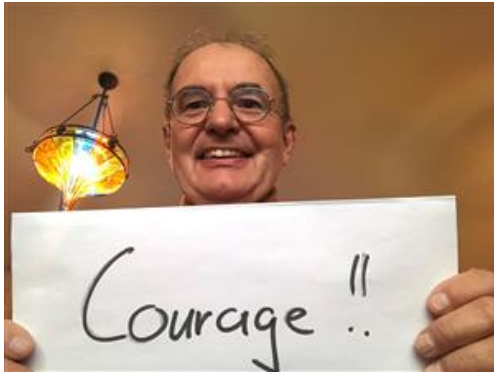


COVID implications & Responses

Willi Graf (SDC), Tunis, 3.4.2020



What does the current situation look like in your country, what were the measures from the government and how are people reacting to it?

The Government of Tunisia has taken quite radical steps to limit the spread of Corona relatively early, when the first cases became known. The measures are similar to European countries and there is discipline and also control with sanctions. In terms of food supply, the situation is still quite acceptable. Supermarkets have been restocked, access is reduced to a certain number of people at a time and things go rather well. Small food shops in lower income surroundings and small trucks bringing fresh vegetables from nearby farmland are popular and recommended. Overall discipline is good and the moments of panic seem to be over. However, there are reports of sporadic riots over flour and the "*semoule*" needed for couscous in particular. On certain goods black markets may emerge and the endemic corruption may start chipping in and create problems for social cohesion.

How is COVID-19 affecting your daily work? If working remotely, experiences so far, best practices, tips for colleagues

I was personally in self-quarantine after coming back from Switzerland and have now spent 3 weeks working exclusively from home. My entire team is on that modus for two weeks now. In the last weeks, several members of our team have been helping the consular colleagues to reach out to Swiss tourists and bring them on repatriation flights. Solidarity within the Embassy is fantastic and everybody is ready to help everybody. Luckily, all our local staff is equipped with notebooks and thanks to a good internet infrastructure I might say we work almost normally. In terms of tips I recommend team leaders to also spend time on asking people on how they are, how they feel, first of all to be human in an inhuman situation, secondly to understand people's situations. The equalizer "office space" is gone and each one is in his personal situation, infrastructure, family members, etc. A second recommendation is to keep learning to use and better use ICT technologies. This is certainly some sort of an opportunity.

In your domain of intervention, what are the immediate effects you are (expecting) to see?

There is unfortunately little doubt that Tunisia is still far away from the peak and of the pandemic and there will be even more restrictions and the economy will dive severely. Tourism is going to be hit a second time after the 2011 revolution and the relative insecurity with several deadly terrorist attacks.

In general, I believe that countries like Tunisia will be hard hit because they have economies that are between the largely formal systems in Europe and the very informal ones in poorer countries. The population knows what social safety nets are and has access to services like health and good education. However, their level of financing is not very solid and will be

shaken by the new crisis. Many people may be pushed back into informality and suffer. Social and even political instability can be the consequence. For a young democracy a very rude and tough exercise.

**What are the most pressing needs and demands of your partners on the ground?
Financing, technical assistance, other...**

The anticipated emergency for the health sector is of such magnitude that those are the most pressing needs and unfortunately, we can hardly respond because materials and equipment are not available on the world market. Outside the health sector, we start getting requests for assistance to vulnerable groups e.g. people in migration and the poorest segment of the population. We respond by enabling existing partners to reallocate budgets and we intend to work with UN partners to prepare smaller municipalities for the corona impact and at the same time for other potential disasters e.g. related to climate change. Tunisia has substantial capacities to lead the response to COVID 19, when the numbers of sick people start to grow. The problems will come when numbers outgrow means. Then both people and money will be needed. With respect to food security, it is too early to assess precise needs. Financial assistance to agricultural businesses of all kinds will be much needed to preserve jobs and keep production high among other to keep food prices at a low level for urban poor and preserve social and political stability. We did not observe it so far, but extremists of all sides may well want to take advantage of the crisis for recruitment and scaling up operations.

How could SDC headquarter best possibly support you to containing the impact of COVID-19 for your partners and beneficiaries?

Headquarters is already giving us flexibility to react to COVID 19 and to adjust programs. This is certainly the most important element. We must be able to respond to requests from partners in a significant way. Else, COVID will also mark a rupture in international trust with far reaching consequences.