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Recognising Italy's mistakes in the public health response to COVID-19

The Day of the Dead in Italy this year was not only a time for remembrance but also for demanding justice for lives lost to COVID-19. On Nov 2, 2021, members of the #Sereni (also known as Serene and Always United) Association demonstrated in Rome against institutional omerta (ie, law of silence) and for the restoration of a parliamentary commission to examine the management of the epidemic. This event followed 520 complaints that were filed by the association 4 months earlier against the national government, the Ministry of Health, and Lombardy region administrators.

To understand the association's objectives and the events that fuel its purpose, it is necessary to examine the beginning of the pandemic in Lombardy. The national government and regional government of Lombardy's decision to not create a so-called red zone around Alzano Lombardo and Nembro (blocking off entrance to and exit from the two communes) when COVID-19 was discovered in people at the end of February, 2020, is seen to be directly responsible for the spread of infection to other towns throughout the province of Bergamo, particularly the Seriana Valley,¹ then throughout Europe. How could a different public health response have stopped the COVID-19 epidemic in Bergamo Province, which went on to become famous in spring of 2020 for corpses piled up in hospitals, churches, and cemeteries and transported by military trucks to the crematoria?

The Lombardy population was shocked by the events and the inconsistency of public health and government authorities alongside an obsolete and unimplemented

pandemic plan.² They were confronted by horror: loved ones dying at home without treatment and alone in hospital, scarcity of oxygen and respirators, and confusion in the identification of cremated bodies. The Istituto Nazionale di Statistica called the events a third world war.³ In reaction, the civil society of Bergamo organised itself into a grassroots justice movement.⁴ The objectives of the #Sereni Association are to obtain truth, justice, reparation, and dignity and offer emotional support in response to the pain, confusion, and resentment for the families of the deceased and the larger community. Many politicians and citizen activists have gravitated to the movement.

The contribution of anthropologists to documenting and analysing the social and political effects of epidemiological events has been crucial⁵ for other infectious diseases (eg, Ebola virus disease and AIDS)—for example, in Africa, where networks such as the Réseau Anthropologie des Épidémies Émergentes (of which we are members) have become central to addressing issues such as vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, and trust. Transdisciplinary research produces evidence on the actions of civil society associations, such as the Sereni Association. This evidence is key for institutions to identify and address mistakes in public health response, which is needed to support communities to prepare for future infectious threats, as recommended by WHO's Community Preparedness Unit.⁶

We declare no competing interests. Members of CoMeSCov are listed in the appendix.

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- 2 Zambon F. Il pesce piccolo: una storia di virus e segreti. Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2021.
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- 5 Sams K, Desclaux A, Anoko J, et al. Mobilising experience from Ebola to address plague in Madagascar and future epidemics. *Lancet* 2017; **390**: 2624–25.
- 6 WHO. WHO COVID-19 social science in outbreak response. Community-centred approaches to health emergencies: progress, gaps and research priorities. Oct 4, 2021. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/community-centred-approaches-to-health-emergencies-progress-gaps-and-research-priorities-who-covid-19-social-science-in-outbreak-response> (accessed Nov 29, 2021).



For more on the Réseau Anthropologie des Épidémies Émergentes see <https://www.raee.fr>

See Online for appendix

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