



**HAL**  
open science

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

Chiara Alfieri, Marc Egrot, Alice Desclaux, Kelley Sams

► **To cite this version:**

Chiara Alfieri, Marc Egrot, Alice Desclaux, Kelley Sams. Recognising Italy's mistakes in the public health response to COVID-19. *The Lancet*, 2022, 399 (10322), pp.357-358. 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02805-1 . ird-03540040

**HAL Id: ird-03540040**

**<https://ird.hal.science/ird-03540040v1>**

Submitted on 25 Jan 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## 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,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> In reaction, the civil society of Bergamo organised itself into a grassroots justice movement.<sup>4</sup> 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 crucial<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

\**Chiara Alfieri, Marc Egrot, Alice Desclaux, Kelley Sams, on behalf of CoMeSCov*  
[chiara.alfieri@ird.fr](mailto:chiara.alfieri@ird.fr)

Laboratoire Population, Environnement, Démographie, UMR 151, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, Aix-Marseille University, Marseille 13001, France (CA, ME, KS); Recherches Translotionnelles sur le VIH et Maladies Infectieuses, UMR 233-IRD, 1175 INSERM, University of Montpellier, Montpellier, France (CA, AD); Walden University, Minneapolis, MN, USA (KS)

- 1 Costanzo G, Sapienza D. La valle nel virus. Milan: Edizioni Underground, 2020.
- 2 Zambon F. Il pesce piccolo: una storia di virus e segreti. Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2021.
- 3 Blangiardo GC. Una terza guerra mondiale? May 31, 2021. [https://www.istat.it/it/files//2020/04/Report\\_Una-terza-guerra-mondiale.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files//2020/04/Report_Una-terza-guerra-mondiale.pdf) (accessed Nov 29, 2021).
- 4 Alfieri C, Desclaux A, Sams K, Egrot M. Mourning while fighting for justice: the first months of the NOI DENUNCEREMO association, Bergamo, Italy. Oct 15, 2020. <https://somatosphere.net/2020/mourning-while-fighting-for-justice.html> (accessed Nov 29, 2021).
- 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

Submissions should be made via our electronic submission system at <http://ees.elsevier.com/thelancet/>

