

Speech by Prof. Luigi Greco on the occasion of the gathering of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei on 9 November 2012 to award the 2012 Feltrinelli Prize to the GULUNAP project of the University of Gulu and the University of Naples Federico II.

After the terrible Ebola epidemic I was urged in 2001 to go to Gulu, in Northern Uganda, to deal with the equally deadly ‘epidemic’ caused by the extremely severe child malnutrition resulting from the raging fratricidal war of Joseph Kony's Lord's Liberation Army and the abandonment of villages and crops. At the height of the war, at St. Mary's Hospital in Lacor we tackled this problem by developing and proposing a very inexpensive food for children, using only local products, which led to an immediate decrease in mortality from over 40% to just under 7% within a year. This ‘NUTRICAM’ (life-saving food) project was then extended to several other centres in the Gulu district.

At that time, however, the health status of the population of Northern Uganda, not only in paediatric age, had plummeted to unacceptable levels, due to the closure of many districts and hospitals and the appalling lack of medical personnel. Only the Italian missionary hospitals still offered essential services, relying on no more than about thirty doctors, often on a part-time basis.

The need therefore arose to ‘fight for peace’ through development projects that also took into account the very serious health problems in the first instance. Together with Prof. Nyeko Pen-Mogi, founder of the University of Gulu in 2002, we identified the establishment of a medical school as a decisive element in improving conditions for the local population. In 2003, a project was drawn up, called GULUNAP, for the establishment of a Faculty of Medicine, with the financial support of Italian Cooperation, under a framework agreement of the University of Gulu with the University of Naples Federico II, signed by Rectors Nyeko Pen-Mogi and Guido Trombetti.

The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Gulu was inaugurated on 4 October 2004, still in the middle of the war. During these eight years, the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Naples Federico II has been the driving force behind the project, contributing, together with other professors from both the Federico II University and other institutions in our country, to the training of students and a new generation of Ugandan teachers who have now been able to assume responsibility for the running of the Faculty.

The course of the GuluNap project can be summarised in the following points:

Educational facilities realised:

- In 2004, the structural renovation of a dilapidated wing of the Gulu Regional Hospital was done. Three classrooms, a multimedia room, the library, a large biochemistry-physiology laboratory, a septic room, studies and offices were built.
- The next suitable location for the teaching facilities was achieved by constructing a large building, inaugurated on 23 January 2010 by the Italian Ambassador to Uganda. The structure, named '**Italian Block GULUNAP**', has three floors with 9 classrooms, various laboratories and a library.
- The clinical and diagnostic departments of the Regional Hospital in Gulu have been rehabilitated and developed, while at St. Mary's Hospital in Lacor, a new site for the University Campus has been built with funding from the Italian Episcopal Conference.
- Through a public-private agreement, a 5-storey Student House with more than 150 beds was built in the vicinity of the hospital.

Role of Italian Cooperation

Since 2003, the Italian Cooperation has provided decisive financial support with a counterpart fund to establish the Faculty. Furthermore, the Cooperation has developed an integrated plan for the years 2007-2009 to support the Faculty of Medicine by strengthening the two *teaching hospitals* in Gulu and Lacor and the health districts of Amuru and Gulu.

Equipment for students:

- The Project made it possible to establish a 'Bank of Books' and equip, quite adequately the facilities for conducting practical activities in Anatomy, Biochemistry, Physiology, Microbiology, Clinical Semeiotics, etc.

The Students

- Through a national competition, between 50 and 60 students per year have been admitted since 2004, supported by scholarships from the Ugandan government, non-governmental organisations and private individuals.
- In January 2010, the first 46 'pioneers' of the 52 enrolled in the Faculty, which started in 2004, graduated in Medicine.
- In January 2011, another 50 students (of the 60 who started in 2005) graduated in Medicine.
- In January 2012, 55 out of 64 students who enrolled in 2006 graduated in Medicine.

- The students designed and produced the 'Gulu Medical Journal' currently in its sixth edition and organised the first International Mental Health Congress in Uganda.

An All-Ugandan Faculty of Medicine

Over the past eight years, a Ugandan faculty of about 30 lecturers in the various medical and biological disciplines has developed. The GULUNAP Project and, later on, the Italian Cooperation, enabled the specialised training (Masters) of about 12 young medical graduates, to position them as lecturers in the new Faculty. Three PhD cycles were also realised.

New medical graduates from 2010 to 2012

To date, the GULUNAP collaboration has produced 151 new doctors in an area of Uganda that, when the project was conceived in 2003, had fewer than 30 doctors in the entire region.

These young doctors were deployed, for the first year after graduation, as residents in all central and rural health facilities in the country. Those who have completed the one-year postgraduate training are all currently actively engaged in Uganda. About a third of these are continuing their studies for specialisation.

None have gone overseas. The University of Gulu has served the entire country of Uganda (Figure attached).

By now, the presence of this crop of young, trained and motivated doctors can be felt throughout the country,

many of them engaged in the development and transformation of entire health facilities. Two doctors have founded a School for Midwives and Nurses in Kitgum, in the far north. Just under a dozen are engaged in Public Health programmes, including family planning and the prevention of AIDS, Malaria and TB.

Prospects for the future

The Faculty of Medicine in Gulu is progressing at a rapid and, in many ways, unexpected pace and already constitutes a significant presence in Uganda.

The students are the most valuable resource with their enthusiasm, but the cohort of lecturers is also strengthening considerably. The near future still depends a great deal on Italian collaboration both in terms of teaching methodology and on a broader cultural and organisational level. In fact, it is now time to develop research structures and departments that can conduct significant scientific activity while attracting resources.

It is therefore necessary to provide for continuity in post-graduate training, since all graduates wishing to obtain a specialisation will have to leave northern Uganda to go to the

cities in the south. This could cause a dramatic drain of qualified human resources, for which the entire project was set up.

Within the framework of GULU-NAP MEDICINE, the development of a post-graduate training phase is being planned by activating three-year Masters (Specialisations) in the priority areas of medicine for the population of that region. A specialisation course in surgery is already in place.

Documentation

- A bilingual website <http://www.gulunap.unina.it> that updates and documents the activities carried out by the GULU-NAP MEDICINE Project has been created and is available on the webpage.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude by reporting two testimonies:

- Italian Ambassador Ballero in a communication to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2011 states:

‘The project to support the foundation and development of a Faculty of Medicine in Northern Uganda, in the city of Gulu’ called ‘GULUNAP’ arose to offer a peaceful response to the terrible 20-year fratricidal war that has devastated Northern Uganda.

In about 7 years, the GULUNAP Project has achieved completely un hoped-for results: as of January 2011, 98 new doctors have already graduated, and are working in every region of the country with great commitment.

I believe that the GULUNAP Project has had a major impact on the city of Gulu and the war-torn region.

I therefore believe that the Project has achieved a high humanitarian significance far beyond the specific contribution to higher education for the following reasons :

- *The project started at the height of the difficult situation of insecurity and war.*
- *It did not result from ‘donations’ or ‘missions’, but from an equal growth between Italian and Ugandan personnel.*

- *The project has created an autonomous structure that is no longer dependent on Italian aid.*
- *The project has been characterised by the decision to focus on service to the community and not on medical specialisation. The young doctors are demonstrating attachment and commitment to their communities and as of 2011 none had left the country (compared to about 60% of graduates in other African medical faculties)'.*

Dr Godson Senyondo, who graduated in Medicine in Gulu in 2010, sent me a message on 28 October 2012 in which he describes, with obvious emotion and emotion, the harrowing journey of a 17-year-old girl who was suffering from an obstruction in childbirth and who, after various vicissitudes, had arrived at the Memorial Hospital in Kalongo while he was on call. Senyondo writes:

“..... immediately found that (the woman) had had a severe birth obstruction for more than 24 hours, had developed severe septicaemia and had a torn uterus, with a dead baby. We struggled, she and I, many hours on death's doorstep.

Akullo is alive, but at 17, she cannot have any more children.

During my two years of practice in various war-torn areas of Northern Uganda, I had to witness first-hand quite a number of these incidents. Mothers who died in childbirth due to a lack of medical personnel, poor transport conditions limiting access to health facilities, working conditions that discourage any motivation in health workers.

These experiences have increased my interest in the public health problems of the people, stimulating me to devote my life to health organisation, epidemiology, health policies to evaluate the most appropriate measures to substantially change the state of health of the population.”

I can find no other words to conclude this speech of mine that give meaning to the motivation of ‘exceptional undertaking of high moral and humanitarian value’ that this Academy wished to recognise to the GULUNAP project by awarding the 2012 Feltrinelli Prize. An award that we will also share with this young doctor who, with the human life he saved, with his professed commitment, urges us to continue to ‘fight for peace’, to ‘fight for life’! Thank you.

Luigi Greco
 Director of the Department of Paediatrics
 University of Naples Federico II
 Associate Dean of the Faculty of Medicine

University of Gulu (Uganda)