

Q&A bursalen en minister Meryame Kitir

Bursalen event 7 december 2020

UGent

Spokeperson: April Lyn Leonar (MSc in Nematology, Philippines, F) Aprillyn.leonar@ugent.be

Q: Dear Minister Kitir, Does the Covid19 pandemic change the Belgian cooperation agenda for the following years, and how do you think the sustainable development goals are impacted in particular? Thank you.

Dear April. Thank you for this question. Indeed, the current pandemic has rocked our world. The global challenges and sustainable development goals have become even more relevant. Most of those goals have been negatively impacted. First there was the sanitary crisis, but it got followed by a deep socio-economic downfall. The progress made the past decades, is partly lost. But, it is also an opportunity to stop and rethink development cooperation.

As for Belgium, during a global crisis, we should show our solidarity. When all is going well, in years with economic growth, it doesn't take a lot of political courage to ask for higher budgets for development cooperation. It is not that difficult to explain in these circumstances to the Belgian citizens that we should share a bit more of our wealth with people and countries that face huge inequalities and poverty.

But now, we will have to show that we are really serious about international solidarity. Even when Belgian debt is on the rise, and when Belgian citizens lose their jobs, we are still a privileged society. We have social protection, we have the means to mitigate the worst effects of the crisis.

Also the coming months and years, we will have to make sure that is that not only the rich countries get the vaccines. We have to make sure that a fair distribution system is set up. On a daily basis, my administration and advisors are working on a national and international level to try to make this happen.

But that is only responding to the immediate needs. In the longer term, we will have to rethink our way of doing things. We need to intervene in sectors and themes that have proven to be essential for human development and resilience. Education, health & sanitation, social protection are high on my agenda. These are sectors where more investment is needed, because when people have access to these services, and are covered by a system of social protection, they will be able to deal with systemic shocks.

VUB

Spokesperson: Analy Baltodano Martinez (Msc. In Water Resources Engineering, Nicaragua, F) analy.baltodanomartinez@student.kuleuven.be

Q: Dear Minister Kitir, With the pandemic, the need for access to clean water for all has become even more visible. Do you think that this can boost development cooperation in this specific sector (water and sanitation)? Thank you.

With my policy I foremost want to strengthen the resilience of people living in poverty. We have seen that COVID-19 disproportionately impacts the poorest. So that is where our focus should be. Indeed, access to clean water is important in the fight against COVID-19. More than one third of primary schools in the world still has no access to clean water. That is why we aim at integrating SDG 6 into our education programmes and also into other programmes. Both our both our bilateral agency and ngo-funding support local communities and governments to increase the access to clean water. We also have projects to build local water treatment installations. And last but not least, I think Belgium has educated a fair share of engineers specialized in the management of water resources, like yourself. That is maybe even the most sustainable intervention. All these students go home and invest their knowhow to make things better for the local population. Because let me be clear: it is not my aim for our development assistance to stay indefinitely in our partner countries. The earlier we can leave, the better.

KU Leuven

Spokesperson: Adriana Lorena Abril Ortiz (Master of Science in Sustainable Development, Ecuador, F) adrianalorena.abrilortiz@student.kuleuven.be

Q: Dear Minister Kitir, The sanitary crisis has deepened socio-economic inequalities. In this context, the partnership between the North and South reflects a bridge of opportunities. What is the main role of Belgian development cooperation in this global scenario of uncertainty and mutual learning? Thank you

I think you are completely right in your analysis. Some have called Covid-19 “the great leveller”, but I believe that the contrary is true unfortunately. I think we are all navigating on the same stormy ocean, but we find ourselves in very different boats. Many developing countries simply do not have the capacity to take measures such as the ones Belgium is taking to support workers, businesses and people in need. Covid-19 has taught us the vital importance of strong public services, safety nets and social protection. For all these things we call upon the state. My policy, which is based on strong solidarity, aims to support those institutions in our partner countries. To name one concrete example: Belgium has enormous expertise in building strong social security systems. This expertise can benefit developing countries in building their own systems that fit their needs and priorities.

UHasselt

Spokesperson Jeridah Nahweera (ICP Statistics, Uganda, M), jeridahnah@gmail.com

Q: Dear Minister Kitir, I am very glad with the opportunity which was given to us through the scholarship. I would like to ask about the reason why the Belgian government gives us a scholarship and what can we do for the Belgian government/institution in return? Thank you.

Dear Jeridah. I am truly happy for you and all your co-students that you have been granted a scholarship. However, as I stated in my opening speech, it is not because of pure luck, but because you worked hard for it.

The reason why Belgium supports VLIR and ARES, is because we believe in change makers. We believe that for students, it is important to have the occasion to study abroad, to be confronted with different contexts and with diversity. The other way around: I also strongly believe that you bring something to us too. I think your insights will also help our Belgian students changing their perspective on things.

With these scholarships we extend our own networks with people all over the world. Even if those networks are informal, they work. They develop into common opportunities, common interests, business links, political friendships and a better understanding.

We don't expect anything in return, except for you to reap this opportunity to the fullest, and reinvest your skills and knowledge. In the longer term, we will all benefit from that. As a statistician for instance, you could make sure policies are developed on the basics of correct data, and provide an evidence-base for evaluation. And yes, we as a development partner of Uganda, will benefit from that. To conclude, we think it best for people and countries to take their lives into their own hands. Our aim is not to stay with our aid, our aim is to move on. If you can help us to achieve this goal, we will be more than happy.

Universiteit Antwerpen

Spokesperson: Ms. Trang Thi Nguyen (Master of Epidemiology, F, Vietnam), Thi.Nguyen@student.uantwerpen.be

Q: Dear Minister Kitir, Throughout the ICP programmes, students from all over the world are gaining knowledge and experience that are crucial to tackle worldwide problems in health, poverty, climate change and many more. What is your vision on involving the alumni of the programmes in future policy decisions, and about supporting them in their role as change agents? Thank you.

As I already briefly explained in my speech and my answer to the previous question, once you graduate, you will become a kind of an ambassador. Alumni are ambassadors of a specific university programme, of the university itself, and of VLIR-UOS and Belgium.

Each of these roles as an ambassador, comes with a responsibility and a possible contribution. For the specific university programme, part of the alumni work is to continue networking with your fellow alumni and professors, as an expert on content and on how you apply your knowledge in your local

professional context. You will also be a valuable resource person for future bursaries to guide them in making the right choices.

You are clearly also an ambassador for the university you graduated from, meaning you can promote the university and the city it is located in.

With regards to VLIR-UOS, keeping in touch with alumni from different programmes and different universities is a way to widen your network, but also a way to give us valuable feedback on our programmes and setup of the bursary scheme. It is important to keep reaching out to VLIR, and to be responsive to future mailings and other contacts from VLIR.

As for Flanders and Belgium, you are our academic ambassador, meaning you are part of our international network.

All universities have their own alumni approach and actions. But also VLIR-UOS provides the ideal platform to facilitate the alumni work, and each individual is an important element in this chain. Like all networks, alumni networks only function well if the people that form the network, are motivated and active.

Next to that, our embassies do organize events for alumni, include alumni in official visits on trade or diplomacy, and in some countries Enabel has a component uniting alumni.