



REVIEW

ITALIAN JPO RESIDENTS IN AFRICA

Six months of specialization in Sub-Saharan Africa with the JPO Junior Project Officer project. This professional and personal training experience inspires new perspectives on global health, as shown by a survey given to the residents involved over the years.

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A GROWING PROJECT

For over 20 years, the JPO – Junior Project Officer project, supported by Doctors with Africa CUAMM, has involved residents specializing in medicine from Italian universities in a training period in the sub-Saharan African countries where CUAMM is active.

It involves months of clinical practice, training, and research in the field where young doctors come face to face with very different worlds from where they are used to working. Structural problems, lack of resources, and social and cultural difficulties are among some of the challenges to be managed during this experience.

Between 2002 and 2020, over 240 residents participated in the project, with a constant growth of applications received and departures; in the first five years of the project, there were seven applications and four departures, which now have grown to 56 applications received and 27 departures in the project's last five years. Out of the 43 faculties of medicine in Italy, 37 have been involved in the JPO project and sent residents. In many instances, they also activated partnership agreements with Doctors with Africa CUAMM, showing the need for internationalization and openness towards low-resource countries.

There are two special qualities of the JPO project compared to similar programs: its six-month duration, which lets residents adapt to the setting and come into real contact with the issues of global health; that it takes place in countries where the relationships between institutions and health worlds are well-established. These factors allow for a well-organized approach, situated in specific settings with collaborations between all those involved.

EVALUATING EXPERIENCES

In March 2023, the BMC Medical Education published the article “International medical electives in Sub-Saharan Africa: experiences from a 19-year NGO-driven initiative”¹, reporting the results of an assessment survey of young residents in the JPO project, with 65% of the responses collected, primarily from residents who went between 2016 and 2020. Most of the questionnaires (54%) were completed by residents who went as JPO in

the last five years of the study's period, with a prevalence of women and residents in pediatrics, public health, and internal medicine. The hospitals of Wolisso, Tosamaganga, and Beira were those that hosted the most residents.

The results of the survey give an interesting snapshot of the project and highlight some partly predictable aspects, including for Italian residents, there are many challenges in training and practicing in the African context in practical, psychological, and cultural terms; the personal and professional growth they gain from it is reported as significant (93% and 80% of the respondents gave these responses, respectively) and often have tangible effects on their professional futures.

Of the respondents, 27% said that the JPO experience had an impact on their career choices: an additional period spent in a medical setting in Africa (29%), the intention to have similar experiences in low-income countries (33%), and still active contact with the African setting (50%) and Doctors with Africa CUAMM (91%). Additionally, they reported acquiring greater autonomy (79%) and resilience in adapting to and managing complex situations (77%).

Naturally, difficult aspects of the experience in Africa also emerged: about 64% noted problems related to the lack of equipment – from devices to medicine – and different ways of working (57%) and exposure to situations for which they did not feel technically prepared (56%) or psychologically prepared (39%). In addition, many of the residents received or perceived medium-low recognition of the JPO experience by their home universities, which is an important point to explore further.

Generally, the JPO project was a significant part of the space for growth in innovative medical training aware of global health issues. Mainstream medical training is almost exclusively focused on clinical aspects with a local range of action. In our times, we need a broader vision and complex tools, a multidisciplinary approach oriented to global health as a practice and as a goal.

NOTES

¹ Quaglio et al., International medical electives in Sub-Saharan Africa: experiences from a 19-year NGO-driven initiative, in BMC Medical Education, March 2023.