

# Rescuing the World Health Organization from itself?

*The strange case of the WHO Report on Italy's first response to COVID-19 removed from the WHO website and never uploaded again*

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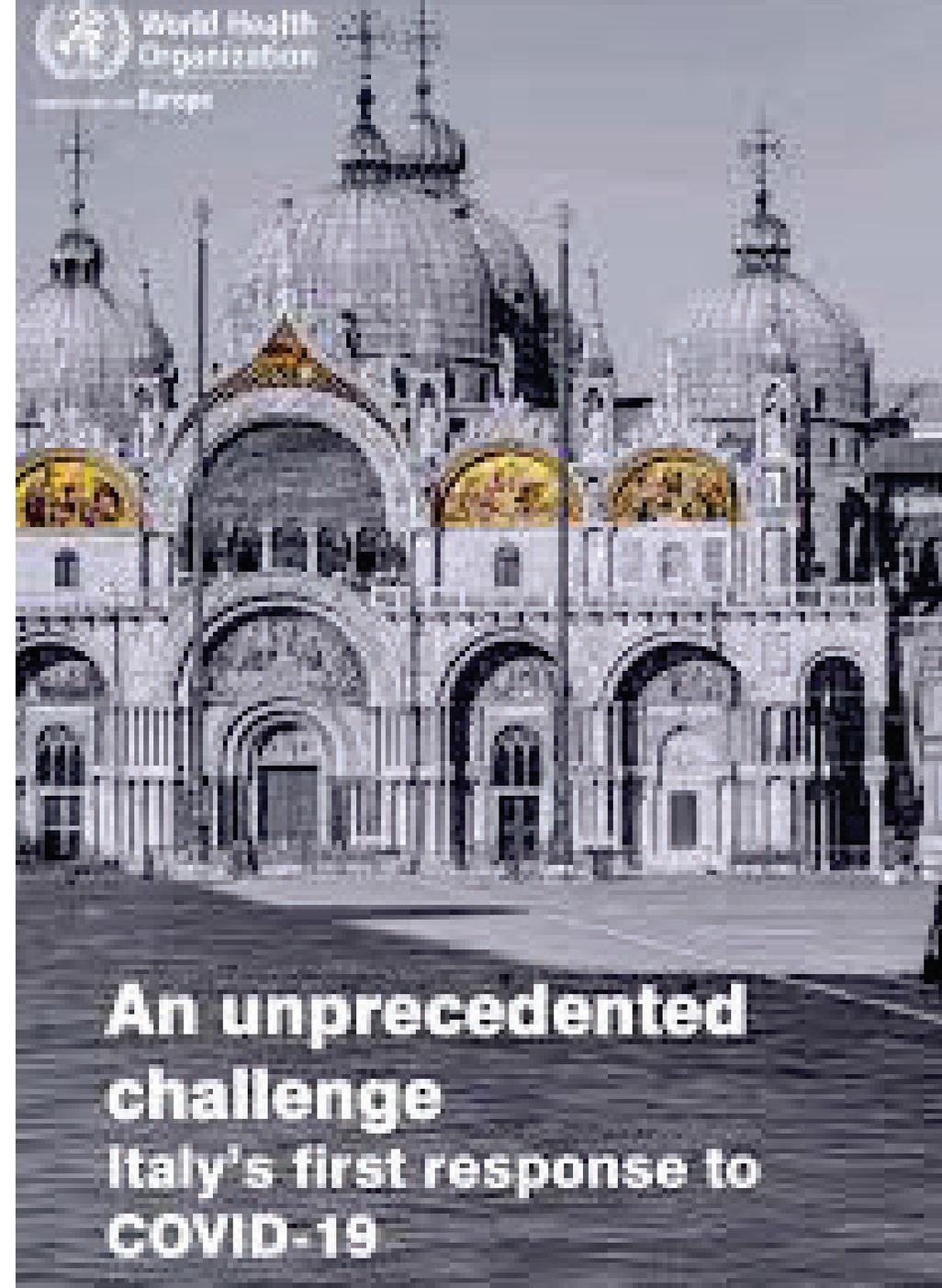
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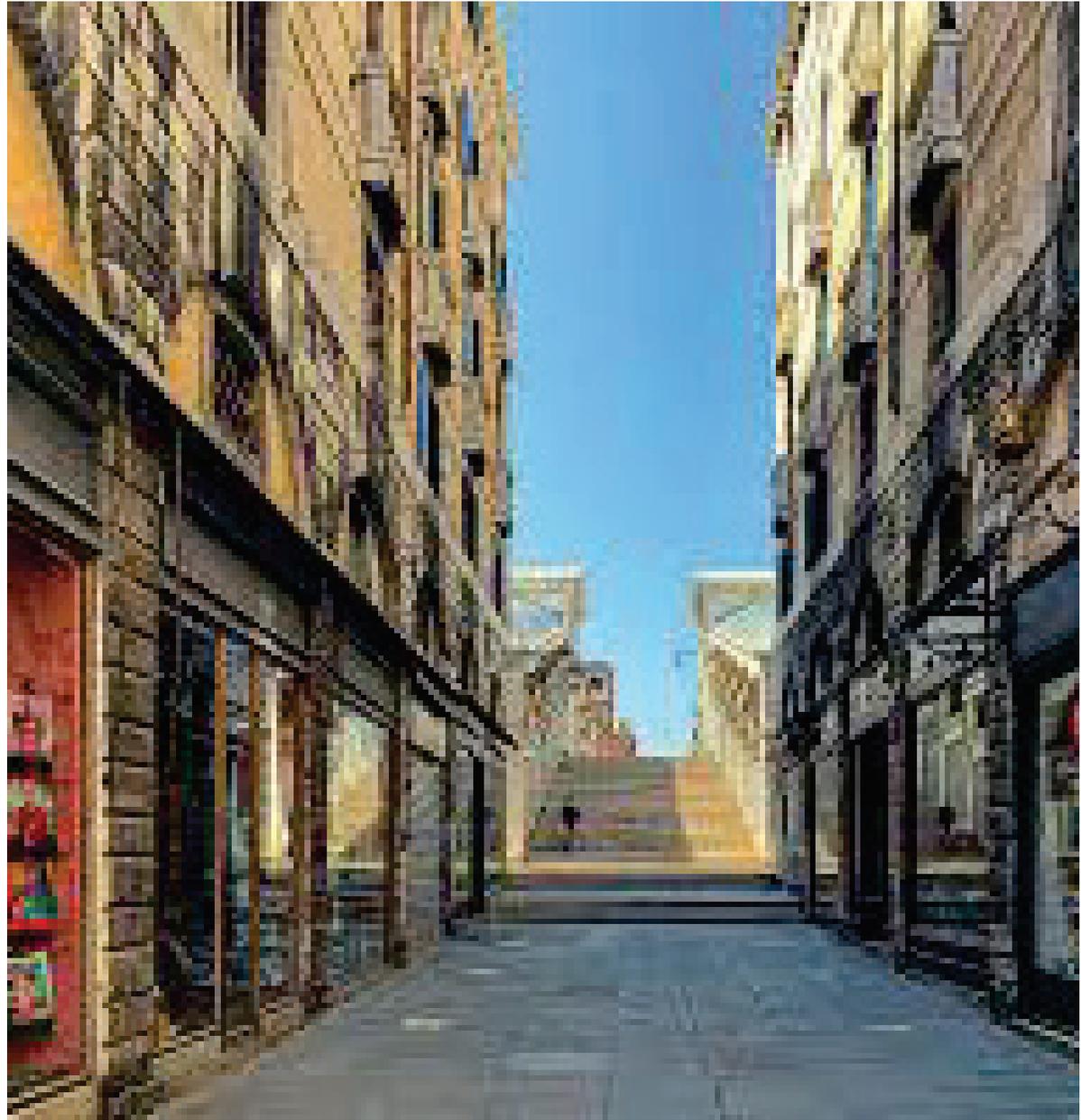




**An unprecedented  
challenge**  
Italy's first response to  
COVID-19

- The WHO/EURO report born out of a very sensible intention in late March: telling the story from the epicenter of the pandemic, *in the midst of the initial phase of SARS-CoV-2*;
- The idea was helping countries globally understand what facing Covid19 entails and the arsenal of measures adopted; how to implement a lockdown; how the virus impact the public health system: ultimately, a lesson sharing exercise!
- Fear that the virus would rapidly spread to eastern Europe through the Balkans
- Data coming from China not structured;
- A report with real-time data, almost: an important asset for the WHO





# What does the report say?

- It mentions, right from the start, that **Italy's pandemic plan was old**. It dated back to 2006, and that its operationalization was more theoretical than real, «with little investments or translation of intentions into concrete measures»;
- It talks about **regional differences in implementing measures**, while the epidemic was taking hold in the country – a key problem in managing the several virus-related much needed actions;
- The downsides of excessive hospitalization & «the silent clusters» of long-term-care facilities: indeed, the blind spot of long-term care!
- The early hospitals' reaction to the mounting wave of severely ill patients was «improvised, chaotic and creative» – **formal guidance took some time**;
- Missing equipment and the dramatic exposure of health personnel;
- Bypassing guidelines and regulations needed at times to detect the virus; Italy's transmission chain not understood yet;
- It provides a **very rich profiling of interventions and methods adopted in each of the 21 Italian regions**, with good practices;

# The report's time route, and more.....

- Idea seeded by the WHO Venice office at the end of March 2020
- Funded through the support of Kuwait
- 10 people team + 3 leading authors / one seasoned penholder
- 32 days for the compilation of the report, which went through the ordinary WHO review procedures for publications, with chief scientist's approval;
- Report published on 13 May and removed on 14 May, due to *problematic issues* with «the China Box»: the question resolved in 2 hours, China box removed altogether;
- The report never uploaded again: why?



The crucial role of the media

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# Different (complementary?) hypotheses

- A few days before the report publication, the Venice team had refused to accept amendments proposals from WHO ADG Ranieri Guerra, who had asked to add the word «updated» in relation to the pandemic plan. Guerra was *seconded* by Dr Tedros to Italy as WHO Rep. in March 2020 to support Italy in the COVID-19 emergency; but he had been director of the prevention department at MoH from 2014 to 2017, hence in charge of the pandemic plan: first problem?
- The Italian government not informed of the report publication: something wrong in the communication line, in view of sensitive statements in the report? Italy upset.
- EURO RD preoccupied for Rome reaction at a time when Italy had pledged USD 10 million to WHO, after 7 years of no funding;
- The «factual inaccuracies» declared by the WHO as the basis of the removal never explained.
- The organization has hidden – and trapped - itself behind a sequence of different justifications



# It is a WHO story

- **WHO internal governance** – this story is creeping through the agency with several levels of critical internal implications;
- **WHO's relationship with Member States** and their potential reactions to the agency's work;
- **WHO capacity to sustain independent research**, in real terms;
- **WHO risk of double standards.** The contradiction between internal sophisticated procedures (whistleblowing/ ethics/Col) and the reality of personal staff agendas and government's agendas – conflict of interest in the public domain?
- **WHO's emotional urge to please member states**, NOT to lose funding, or to beg for new funding;
- If something like this happens with a middle power like Italy, what happens with geopolitical powers like China and the US?



Ultimately, it is our story. Can the world live with such a weak and confused agency?