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Since 2000 Giovanni Andrea Cornia teaches development economics at the University of Florence. He has also taught courses in this area at the European University Institute, and the Universities of Bologna, Cambridge, Clermont Ferrant, Helsinki, and Pavia. In 2010 he was a visiting fellow at the University of Oxford. He has made over 150 presentations in academic and research centers in developing, transitional and developed countries. Since 2000 he has consulted for international and bilateral development agencies, foundations, developing countries governments, and NGOs. He has visited for professional reasons 109 developed, developing or transitional countries.

Cornia obtained two master degrees (economics and statistics) at the University of Bologna. Between 1972 and 1974 Cornia did modelling work at the Macroeconomic Study Centre of FIAT in Turin. Before being appointed in 1981 Chief Economist of Unicef based in New York, he worked in research positions at the UN Economic Commission for Europe based in Geneva (with a stint at CEPAL, Santiago de Chile), and UNCTAD (Geneva). Between 1989 and 1995 he directed the economic and social policy research program of the International Child Development Centre (now IRC) based in Florence. Finally, between August 1995 and December 1999 he worked as Director of UNU-WIDER in Helsinki. WIDER is ranked among the top 3 best development think-tanks on development.

Cornia has edited or co-edited 15 books on various aspects of development and transition economics, and authored substantial parts of them. One of these volumes was translated in 7 languages. He also contributed 28 chapters to books edited by other scholars, edited four special issues of scientific journals, published 45 articles in refereed journals, 50 working papers, and coordinated 6 large institutional reports. Cornia's work has focused on macroeconomic, inequality, poverty, public economics, mortality and human development issues in developing and transitional economies. He has also worked on growth models, land reform, structural adjustment models, as well as models and approaches to the transition in the former communist countries.