



FOR A NEW COMMITMENT OF THE RED CROSS/RED CRESCENT TO A HUMANITARIAN DRUG POLICY

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It is a great pleasure for me to welcome such an eminent group of Red Cross and Red Crescent colleagues. I would like to congratulate you for coming all the way to Rome by using an Italian but universal word: Bravo. Bravo for coming from all the corners of the world to discuss the difficult issue of drugs. We have almost 35 national societies gathered today; I think we can all agree that this is already an achievement, a very promising one.

Your presence today in Rome is a strong reminder of the formidable power of mobilization of our Movement that can take on difficult task and discussion.

The fight against drug related suffering is at the core of our mission

Today, I would like to talk about the contribution of our Movement to the fight against drug-related suffering.

Some of you, my dear colleagues, may wonder why our Movement should get involved? There are so many issues that matter in the world, so many groups that need assistance.

The answer is simple: we should care because drugs and the formulation and implementation of drug policy are among the biggest source of human suffering in our society. This suffering does not stop at the small vulnerable group of drug users but it impacts on all sections of our society from the spread of disease like AIDS, violence among young people to poverty and destitution. This is why drug related suffering is not a marginal issue but should be treated as strategic policy effort.

After more than 50 years with the Movement, I have never seen so much human suffering and stigmatization than in drugs. Sadly a big share of this suffering is caused as much by the repressive policies as by the substances themselves. This suffering does stop at users only, it affects their immediate families and communities at large. The spread of AIDS is a sad indicator of the broad impact of drugs on our society.

This is why we must mobilize our power of humanity to fight on all fronts of drug-related suffering.

This is a fight with must take at both level of activity and advocacy

Our Movement's guiding principle is to fight human suffering and take every possible step to prevent it regardless of race, religion and economic divides.

Our unique power of humanity is to reach out communities and issues that everybody else has neglected. But this power comes with special responsibility.

The first responsibility is that the neutrality must become active where human suffering is out of control. Our Movement can be active on two fronts. Active on the ground to provide care and support to drug victims and their families; but active also at the advocacy level to support the development and implementation of policies that help avoid more suffering.

The strength of this double engagement gives The Red Cross / Red Crescent immense possibilities to make a difference in the fight against drug suffering

We all agree that stigma kills. Discrimination and indifference kill more than the abuse of substances. Moreover, stigmatisation and lack of care for drug victims are unwise and destructive not only for the users themselves, but also for the communities in which they live. A drug user is already dangerous to himself. But a drug user who is not known and taken care of by the institutions in a human way is twice more dangerous. My experience as a doctor who has worked more than 30 years with drug users has shown me one thing: humanitarian care is the best way out of addiction and ultimately out of drug use.

Everywhere in the world, even in countries that uphold human rights, drug users are still denied basic citizen rights. Drug users are humiliated, bullied, discriminated and treated more as criminals than as sick people. Public opinion and well thinking people are often complicit of this stigmatisation. Discrimination means that drug users are not given any chance to fight their addiction and that drugs end up affecting the society as whole through the spread of AIDS, violence and social misery.

The policies developed to tackle drug use too often contribute to make the situation worse. The use of violence against users has no rational and logical basis. Violence engenders more violence and suffering, and ultimately affects the wider community. Our Movement has a strategic duty to respect difference and promote tolerance and fight intolerance. I am not suggesting that we should show passive compassion and resignation towards use and abuse of drugs. But between negative judgment based on fear and ignorance and *laissez faire*, we must find a new way, that is of active compassion, of listening, treating and advocating for policies that prevent more suffering.

A strong track record of commitments in the fight against drug suffering

So, concretely, what is this new way ahead?

First, I am proud to say that throughout the 20th century, our Movement showed a significant commitment and interest in the fight against drug related suffering. The League and the General Assembly issued on many occasions some important decisions and resolutions. The list of those decisions has been circulated to all participants, but I would like to quote the decision of the General Assembly of the League of Red Cross / Red Crescent Societies in Geneva in 1986:

“Bearing in mind that the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has immense possibilities and a human potential working to alleviate human suffering the world over,

Urges the responsible bodies of the RC/RC to consider this programme as being one of the Movement’s present and future priorities, and,

Recommends National Societies to give all necessary support to the programme of prevention, rehabilitation and treatment of young drug addicts, in accordance with their needs, possibilities and existing resources...”

More recently, the Federation released its Guidelines for Harm Reduction Measures in the Fight Against AIDS. These guidelines represent an important step in bringing more science and reason to the fight against drug use, which has been for too long obscured by ignorance and fear.

A sophisticated range of public health and social instruments are available today to fight drug related suffering. It is not a problem of scientific knowledge or even of funding. Methadone is a very cheap and effective way for example. The problem lies in political dogma. That is why we now have to take our effort at the policy level. This is the next step of engagement that our Movement can take in the 21st century – to help develop a more humanitarian and rational drug policy that reduces suffering and avoids to create some additional one.

Against ideology and politics, we need a collective banner for a humanitarian drug policy. With our power of humanity we can bring drug policy to more neutral, humanitarian ground, away from ideology. The Rome Consensus which was initiated in December 2005 by some of your colleagues provides this opportunity for a new commitment.

The Rome Consensus is a new opportunity to show our commitment

I would like to conclude by saying that we have to fight stigma and discrimination, we have to organize ourselves in order to have more power, to put better pressure on our Governments in order for them to adopt a three hundred sixty degrees humanitarian strategy, to know and to take care of all drug users and to avoid rising social problems.

In a globalized world, we all have to mobilise our power of humanity in order to offer sustainable and systematic solutions to a problem as wide-reaching as drugs. This meeting in Rome is the occasion to propose a new Rome Consensus with a road map for our Movement to take drug policy as a strategic issue to be dealt at all the levels of actions of our National Societies.

Together, only together, we can make a difference. The Rome Consensus is your opportunity to make this difference.

Thank you for your attention.