

17TH ERNA GENERAL MEETING

Minsk, 27 – 29 September 2013

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Migration is part of mankind's fate. It has existed until now and it will always exist.

Since the advent of human beings, people have moved seeking better prospects, especially when life conditions in their habitual residence have been made difficult, or even impossible, by either human naughtiness, poverty, epidemics or other natural disasters.

Those forced to leave are vulnerable persons by definition and their moving often makes them even more vulnerable.

It is because of this extreme vulnerability that migrants represent privileged targets for the International Movement of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent which, more than once, has clearly expressed, without any possible exegetic doubt, its policy in this particular field.

Among all the Movement's stances taken in favour of migrants I would like to remind the ten principles of the policy approved by the 17th General Assembly of the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent in Nairobi in 2009:

1. Focus on the Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants
2. Include Migrants in Humanitarian Programming
3. Support the Aspirations of Migrants
4. Recognize the Rights of Migrants
5. Link Assistance, Protection and Humanitarian Advocacy for Migrants
6. Build Partnerships for Migrants
7. Work Along the Migratory Trails

8. Assist Migrants in Return
9. Respond to the Displacement of Populations
10. Alleviate Migratory Pressures on Communities of Origin.

I think that all of us should bear in mind these ten principles before addressing the themes of this ERNA meeting.

Furthermore, as a demonstration of the relevance that the Movement attaches to migrants' safeguard, we should also remind the Resolution on Migration approved by the 31st International Conference held in Geneva in November 2011 which is a more important act because it also applies to States and Governments.

I would like in particular to stress the following paragraphs of the said resolution, which relate directly with the scope of our meeting:

- *acknowledging the importance of respect for the human dignity and protection of all migrants, and expressing its deep concern about the continued suffering of those migrants that may live outside conventional health, social and legal systems and for a variety of reasons may not have access to processes which guarantee respect for their fundamental rights;*
- *expressing concern about the often alarming humanitarian situation of migrants in situations of vulnerability, at all stages of their journey and ongoing risks that migrants, in situations of vulnerability, face in regards to their dignity, safety, access to international protection as well as access to health care, shelter, food, clothing and education;*
- *recognising that, acting in accordance with the Statutes of Movement, in particular Article 3 (1) National Societies should enjoy effective access to all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, in order to deliver humanitarian assistance and protection services without being penalised, both in their role*

as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field at all levels and under their general humanitarian mandate.

In my opinion, the key expression of this resolution, mentioned in its preamble as well as in its ruling, is “*irrespective of their legal status*”.

By this resolution States are requested to ensure that their National Societies enjoy effective and safe access to migrants, regardless of their legal position, which is often compromised by legislations inspired by widespread xenophobic approaches stemming from peoples’ egoism and fear of diversity. Actually, because of these legislations, migrants are often deprived of their liberty in jail or in concentrating camps, instead of being welcomed and supported in improving their own quality of life by the host communities.

Pragmatically speaking, before talking about migration and health or, more precisely, about migration and HIV and TB, we should ask ourselves about our respective National Societies’ positions on access to migrants. Do we have access to all migrants or are there any obstacles put by authorities?

Are our volunteers protected from legal negative consequences if they get in touch and assist the so-called illegal migrants?

Can the Red Cross have access to prisons and concentrating camps?

If obstacles exist, which are the advocacy actions undertaken in order to improve the Red Cross’ access to migrants?

The problem of the access is becoming more and more important in any operation carried out by the Movement, not only in peacetime but also and especially in wartime.

The ongoing Syrian tragedy is worsening day by day also because the Red Cross is not given the necessary access to victims. Furthermore, the Conflicting Parties breach the Geneva Conventions openly, even neglecting that, also in wartime, there are minimal rules to abide with.

Due to this open disregard of the International Humanitarian Law, the Movement has undergone a heavy death toll, with more than 20 Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers killed, whose sacrifices I would like to remind with deep feeling today.

Even if the conditions of migrants cannot be compared to those of war victims (be they soldiers, insurgents or civilians), the living conditions of migrants are always jeopardised by actions that other people undertake against them.

The International Movement of the RC/RC is universally recognised as one of the highest moral authorities and it cannot remain silent when political decisions affect directly and gratuitously the living conditions of migrants, also posing at risk the health of the host communities and transit countries, because diseases do not know borders.

Limiting migrants in accessing to levels of health care similar to those ensured to citizens may represent a sort of “own goal” with potential serious consequences for public health.

Furthermore, it has also to be taken into account that even if significant levels of health care are formally available for migrants, the actual access to these services is often compromised by the emotional and physical strain they undergo because of both travel difficulties and the unfriendly approaches met in the host community.

Women are particularly exposed in conditions of marginalization often becoming victims of different kind of exploitation. Beside, in such situations, many people avoid contacts with doctors fearing they could inform the police.

All these factors may have a negative impact on both individual and public health, by easing risky attitudes and then transmission of diseases. People normally ignore ways in which they can actually transmit viruses or they often underestimate risks by assuming themselves as immune from infection.

Lingual and cultural barriers play a key role in this context by biasing the social perception of AIDS/HIV and TB affected people which varies from country to country, with strong differences especially between the developed and the developing ones. The migrant, often coming from the latter, generally keeps his cultural heritage, including an hostile and shaming approach towards AIDS/HIV and TB affected people. This results in further stigma and discrimination and, as we always say, we know that “stigma kills”.

Finally we should also consider some pathologic peculiarities that AIDS/HIV and TB affected migrants often present compared to sick autochthones. In general, massive migrations represent ideal laboratories for viruses or bacteria biological modifications which can weaken the effectiveness of existing pharmacological therapies. This matter has to be taken into special account in developed countries which can rely on many and diversified pharmacological items for treating these microorganisms in a appropriate manner.

Advocacy for improving migrants' living conditions by safeguarding their access to health services; information and training; fight to stigma and discrimination: these all are initiatives

that our Movement is able to undertake reasonably and we, be us either leaders or operators, have the burden to remind these possibilities to our National Societies and to the whole Movement.