

English version

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Volunteering, HIV and TB

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Let me start by thanking the ERNA Board and the Red Cross Society of Georgia for inviting me to take part in the XVI ERNA Annual General Meeting. In Georgia I feel at home thanks to the traditional friendship between both our countries and National Societies, links strengthened in particular in connection with the conflict in Ossetia. It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be here today, one year after the meeting in Slovenia, in my role not only as member of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross Red Crescent, former ERNA Chair, or founder of the Villa Maraini Foundation, but particularly as one of the over 13 million Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers worldwide.

Having myself joined the Italian Red Cross at the age of eight, I proudly declare myself a long-lasting member and representative of the organisation in which I feel completely fulfilled as citizen as well as person. I am personally very proud that I have been able to make this contribution, but even more proud of the real difference that my individual effort, connected to that of millions of others, can make in the world.

The RC/RC International Movement represents to me, as well as to many colleagues from other National Societies, the chance to play a positive role in the world, contributing to improve the standard of living of millions, in particular the most vulnerable ones. Life is a hard exercise for all, but for somebody it can even be so much tough as to become unbearable. Many people would like to do something more in order to improve others' standard of living, but finding the way to do it is definitely the hardest obstacle in this effort. The RC/RC shows us the way to do that thanks to its network made by 13 million volunteers in some 190 countries with their premises, equipments and means always on the go 24 hours a day. Being part of the Movement

then means the possibility to work together using all these structures and so providing operational outcomes which are, by far, larger than the simple sum of individual efforts. But being RC/RC volunteer is not only an honour, it is also a commitment: that of always working in compliance with the 7 Principles which represent a sort of "Holy Book" of the Movement.

Let me underline, once again, the relevance of such Principles which 50th anniversary of their adoption will be celebrated in 2015. Well, these Principles - set out after intense debates and discussions, especially thanks to Mr Jean Pictet, prominent ICRC figure - remain unchanging in a world where constitutions and laws do not often last more than weeks or months. In Geneva, last November, during the International Conference, candidates to the Standing Commission were asked whether they wanted to suggest possible amendments to such Principles. I replied that I did not see any need to amend them: the same stance was expressed by the majority of the candidates. The Fundamental Principles are actually the unifying factor which makes millions working together feel like an "*unicum*" - in spite of cultural, racial, social and religious differences - and so showing the real "Power of Humanity". I know that this expression could result as redundant or even rhetorical to somebody: but he is wrong. The "Power of Humanity" actually represents the substantial outcome of the work of our volunteers on the ground, people who serve the RC/RC, speak the same language and use the same terms all over the world: protection, assistance, Florence Nightingale, Henry Dunant, 2020 Strategy, the most vulnerable people, the women from Castiglione, Solferino, "*Tutti fratelli*". This is one of the added values of the Movement we always have to bear in mind, making the most of it.

Voluntary Service is one of the seven Fundamental Principles that guide the work of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and that represents the unique difference between our Movement and any other humanitarian and civil society organisations worldwide. By acknowledging that people themselves are the most important resource for their own progress and that of the wider communities they belong to, we recognise volunteering as an integral part of the social fabric of our societies.

When I talk about the difference existing between the International Movement of the RC/RC - which is, as you know but many do not, a whole made up with different institutions - and other entities expressed by Civil Society, such as NGOs, I do not intend to under evaluate or to discriminate these organisations, which often do an extraordinary work. I solely intend to underline factors that make RC/RC unique in the world panorama. First of all the RC/RC auxiliary status which allows RC/RC to play a partnership role, bridging the gap between public authorities and citizens at any governmental level.

Our auxiliary status lead us to stay closer to governments: that is both an opportunity and a responsibility. In international meetings at UN level, if NGOs raise their voices in favour of people they intend to protect, there is often an absent-minded reaction from governmental representatives, as if they were used to listening such protests. If the same petitions are promoted by the RC/RC the attention is always greater. That is what has happened for instance at the UNODC meetings in Wien the last years. Participants bored by the everlasting contest on drugs policy issues between governments and Civil Society have literally been awoken by listening to Lady Keith and Lasha Gogvadze's intervention highlighting the need of

emphasising the humanitarian approach to the detriment of merely repressive policies.

That is what we mean when we talk about advocacy. All of us well know that this wording is not particularly neutral. We advocate in favour of something or somebody and, in the meantime, against something else. When we talk about a humanitarian drug policy we are against the governments which ban effective treatments for drug users and prefer instead putting them in jail or rehabilitation centres which really look like concentration camps. If we remain silent we will break the first and more important of our Principle, the Humanity one. Actually, even if the RC/RC may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature we cannot and must not remain neutral towards human sufferance. Human suffering represents, in its various forms, our enemy and we are called to fight it by both words and facts, bearing in mind that "advocacy is on safer ground when supported by activities", as stated in our 2010 Strategy.

And now let me spend some words on NGOs working in the field of HIV and TB, wishing that mutual cooperation with these entities can improve in the future, also thanks to this meeting. In a globalised and interconnected world it is presumptuous to think that one can act on his own. I am intimately persuaded that, in the past, our Movement was not a great example of cooperation towards those whom our statutory bodies today define as "external actors". Nowadays cooperation is a must and I think that RC/RC can look with interest at competencies and engagement of many NGOs. As far as the subject of this meeting is concerned, I would look especially at those representing affected people, which action has contributed to

radically change the approach of many governments towards HIV, TB, malaria and STDs issues. Thanks to these radical changes the situation has definitely improved.

The fact that we are all gathered here today is the living proof that HIV and AIDS remain a stark reality in nowadays global humanitarian scenario, and even more so in the Europe Zone, whose National Societies ERNA represents. Eastern Europe and Central Asia is the only region where HIV prevalence clearly remains on the rise. According to UNAIDS, the number of people living with HIV has almost tripled since 2000 and reached an estimated total of 1.4 million in 2009. A rapid rise in HIV infections among people who inject drugs at the turn of the century caused the epidemic in this region to surge.

Even in such worrying scenario, I believe there is room not just for hope, but for real action. Let us imagine the difference that - even as we speak - every single Red Cross Red Crescent volunteer around the world is making to carry out our collective fight against HIV and TB. Volunteers can take action in a variety of roles and contexts, from peer-to-peer awareness-raising activities in schools, to condom distribution in nightclubs, to HIV help lines, to health services for drug users. Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers - and, in particular, the some 50% youth among them - who are driven by the Seven Principles, are also protagonists of the fight against stigma and discrimination, messengers for a culture of non-violence and peace and for better understanding and acceptance of diversity.

It is thanks to their unrivalled network of community-based volunteers that National Societies can bridge the gap between

healthcare institutions and households, reaching out to the most vulnerable and marginalized people in local communities, such as, in this case, people living with HIV, TB, or people who inject drugs.

Among all our potential activities, I believe that RC/RC can really make the difference in the treating of DUs. In this field, many countries of the world still follow obsolete policies which rationale sinks in oceans of prejudice. The prejudice which lead many people to think that punishment and violence against DUs work as deterrent for both community and individuals' sake. Reality is quite different. Drug addicted people's life is particularly unhappy and difficult. The ban of more effective treatments, combined with detention and related stigma and discrimination, provokes almost intolerable living conditions where drugs appear to be the sole relief. That is why, in many countries of the world, repressive policies against DUs worsen the situation for both community and individuals. Fighting these prejudices in the name of Humanity Principle responds to a general interest. RC/RC volunteers, enjoying the trust of both authorities and marginalised people are in the best position to intervene by reaching out to and treating individuals who are used to hiding themselves, afraid of repressive measures foreseen for DUs in different countries.

Here I would like to remind an experience which has strongly impressed me: last year, during a visit I had the honour to pay to the Tajik RC, I remarked that many RC premises near the Afghan border had spared room to meet the numerous opiate addicted of that area in order to let them approach substitutive treatments now made available by the government, after old preconceived ideas have been overcome by new, clear scientific evidence recognised at the

international level. This is an example of important intervention which can be repeated in other sensitive contexts.

The most powerful examples of voluntary work in the case of HIV or TB is that of people who, from beneficiaries of Red Cross Red Crescent services, became volunteers and caring members of their communities. From my side, I can bring the long-lasting experience of the Villa Maraini Foundation, which I established over 35 years ago in the heart of Rome, and which over the years has become a leading organization in the assistance to drug users and people living with HIV, as well as in the fight against discrimination and stigma of every kind. A social labour cooperative whose members are former DUs was established in 1981, with activities such as gardening and typography for external contractors. Several former DUs have joined the Italian Red Cross, becoming volunteers and involved in all kinds of RC/RC activities, both in Italy and abroad. Former drug users now make up one third of the staff, so that peer education is now not only a concept but a growing reality.

When former Red Cross/Red Crescent beneficiaries - who have experienced on their own skin the stigma and discrimination of HIV and TB, faced the rejection of people and lived through the difficulties of everyday life - decide to start volunteering, they often show a level of commitment, dedication, experience, and, as a consequence, quality of the service, without any equal. Their unique capacity to reach out to those who find themselves in the same situation give them an unrivalled advantage, and at the same time enables them to grow as well adjusted, responsible, and caring members of the communities they inhabit.

I am particularly happy to inform you that, this summer, after a many years lasting debate and thanks to the pressure put by the Federation GB, the IFRC, the Italian RC and Villa Maraini Foundation have agreed to establish a training and research structure which will work as reference centre of the Movement for issues related to drug use. By attending the ceremony of signature of such an agreement, the IFRC president, Mr Tadateru Konoe, has testified the relevance of RC/RC in the activities in favour of DUs and HIV/AIDS affected people.

Before closing my intervention, please let me express some final thoughts on ERNA. This regional network truly represents a success story within our Federation, even if it has not been easy, especially at the beginning, when many NNSS raised doubts on its creation, also considering some unsuccessful similar initiatives.

RC/RC structures sometimes suffer from a lack of collective memory, probably due to rapid staff turnover; many initiatives see the light once, twice, sometimes three times, before sinking into oblivion without any positive feed-back for Federation and National Societies. Well, I am particularly pleased to remark that this is not the case of ERNA, as demonstrated by this 16th General Meeting of the Network. I think that all of you have to be credited for this success story, in particular those in the Federation Secretariat who have strongly believed in the worthiness of the project, in these years developed as a powerful tool of training and capacity building. Also NNSS which have run the ERNA Secretariat should be given similar credits, especially for supporting the work of the board members whose engagement has really made the difference.

Within our network, we may say that the NNSS of Eastern Europe countries, as well as those from Central Asia, have offered a greater contribution compared to that expressed by their sister societies in Western Europe, in particular in terms of work on the ground. This probably results from the above mentioned increasing widespread of HIV registered in such countries. In this regard, ERNA experience tell us that there are no first and second category societies and that it is not time anymore for participating societies from rich countries to impose their will and rules on operating societies. ERNA has taught us that partnership with equal rights and duties is the right way to follow. It has also taught us how important leadership and training can be for achieving substantial outcomes, that in our case means helping more vulnerable people, lessening the widespread of diseases, greater level of happiness - or, more realistically, minor level of unhappiness - in those hit by pathologies which make life difficult to enjoy.

Many people in our continent have improved their standard of living thanks to our common effort: I think it is a good reason for taking part all together, once again, in an ERNA Meeting. Thank you.

Massimo Barra