

NEW YORK. MASSIMO BARRA STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS/RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

Mr. President

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you today on behalf of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the world's largest humanitarian network, comprising 190 member National Societies and working through 17 million community-based volunteers.

Our mission is to prevent or mitigate human suffering in all its forms, and there's no doubt that substance abuse is one of the major causes of suffering. As Prof. Claude Ollivenstein said: *"Il n'y a pas de drogués heureux"*. That is why the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have raised their voices about the negative consequences of drug consumption for many decades, starting with the Asian Regional Conference of Bangkok in 1922--at the time of the opium abuse--to the present day.

We were among the first international organizations to call for human, evidence-based, harm reduction policies for drug users—policies practiced today through many National Societies around the world, in partnership with public authorities.

We have been very concerned about the humanitarian consequences of approaches to drug use relying exclusively on pursuit and punishment of addicted persons and neglecting support, care and treatment. The public health research on this issue is very clear – a more human approach simply works much better to prevent the worst consequences of drug use.

As a medical doctor who met about 40.000 drug users in the institution I created in 1976, the Italian Red Cross – Villa Maraini Foundation in Rome, I can personally attest that repressive attitudes towards drug users are against the public interest, and that we should have access especially to hard-to-reach populations who live in the shadows. Meet-and-treat should be our slogan.

Mr. President,

People dependent on drugs continue to be among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the world. Yet in too many instances, instead of being met with understanding and provided with equitable access to treatment and care - drug users remain excluded from society, they face social stigma, and they are punished and imprisoned rather than treated. In this regard, we would like to underline the particular vulnerability of women and youth.

It is in the interest of each of us to accept and extend a supportive hand towards people using drugs instead of rejecting them. Addressing their humanitarian needs is an important step leading to their empowerment and recovery. This is not impossible if there is a real political will to do so. We need a different approach in which we emphasize the health challenges and needs of drug users.

Mr. President,

Today – we have a unique opportunity to call for policies that safeguard equitable access to health care. We therefore urge governments to implement effective measures to reduce health risks that are people-centred and inclusive. As was said by the WHO Director General yesterday, the scientific evidence is very clear and we need to take it into account when building our policies.

For their part, through the large network of volunteers present in hard to reach communities, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide are well-placed **to increase their partnership** with local authorities, other stakeholders at community level and Civil Society Organizations in such a way as to **bridge the existing gap** between formal health institutions and the most marginalized populations, and to ensure truly no one is left behind