

Speech

UHC and COVID-19: Operationalizing Commitments to Leave no one Behind Side Event at the 75th United Nations General Assembly

Thank you Chair,
dear friends,

substance abuse, along with armed conflicts, is one of the major unsolved cause of human suffering with million people affected, who are not receiving adequate help and treatment, or even worse are totally left behind because of the stigma and hate against them.

Especially now, the Pandemic risks to become the “perfect excuse” behind which to justify further inaction against the persons that I call “sick for drugs”.

Our personal experience in the field here in Rome, in the Villa Maraini Recovery Drug Centre, where we meet and treat more than 600 Drug Users everyday, showed us that drug consumption didn't find any limitation also during the lockdown.

We have monitored and checked the health conditions of thousands of them in the last months. Despite their risky behaviours no one was found infected or sick by Covid19. Based on this experience we can say that all the limitations put by the public health services to treat and meet them, due to the fears related to the virus are not justified, also in light of their particular immune situation who deserves further and deeper studies.

Therefore, all therapeutic activities can and must be continued to protect them, in particular: substitution therapies, harm reduction and alternative measure to prison.

We, and all the workers of this field, are deeply concerned for the SCARCE resources available to tackle drug problems by the States. Especially now that the health system is mainly focused on covid-19 response.

Despite the good declarations from policy makers and the increased scientific evidence, the best practice available to address the drugs health problems are poorly implemented.

There are still too many governments all over the world that adopts inadequate strategies to improve the quality of life of people with drug disorders.

In some other countries, governments continue to ignore the health consequences of those who are affected by drugs by considering them just as criminals and therefore are punished and imprisoned instead of being treated.

Indeed, 1 on 4 of the inmates in the world are in prison for drugs reasons, and they are forced to live in a pathological and pathogenic environment where their disease is not treated at all.

Harm Reduction programmes are crucial, governments need to make clear and urgent moves towards health and rights based approaches, for example by providing alternative measures in the criminal justice field like the pre-arrest deflection and diversion. Treatment and punishment can't work together.

Treating people "sick for drugs" should be a common interest of all governments. International community must find a concrete strategy that can change people life, like it has been done with the Global Fund against Hiv, TB and Malaria.

Global Fund changed the world !!

For this reason in the last month, together with other international experts on substance abuse, we discussed about the idea to create a New Global Fund specific for Drug World Problem.

A global fund, based on humanitarian drug policy, could be an effective tool to truly mitigate the health conditions of millions of people marginalized, stigmatized and left behind.

Making easier the access to health for this vulnerable groups, will also dramatically decrease the rates of violence and deaths all over the world ... and bring us closer to the goal of Universal Health Coverage.

Thank you

Massimo Barra

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