

# 22nd ERNA annual general meeting

## Malaga 8-10 November 2022

### Speech

Distinguished delegates,  
dear colleagues,  
buenos dias a todos,

welcome to the 22nd ERNA annual meeting. It is a big pleasure to see you all again, here reunited, after 3 years of virtual meetings because of COVID19. Looking people in the eyes and meet them in person produces very different results compared to the online call. It looks like a little miracle to see you all gathering here in one room, especially if we consider that there are delegates coming from countries in war among them, and from so far away, we succeeded in overcome the big obstacles of bureaucracy to get a visa and reach this place, despite everything is happening in our Region.

Let me thank the Spanish Red Cross Society for their hospitality and for their commitment. It is a honor for ERNA to have such a powerful National Society on its side. Let me personally greet and thanks the Vice President and the General Coordinator of Spanish RC, the President of Malaga Branch and its Coordinator who are giving us the best welcome possible and letting us feel like home. Gracias.

Dear colleagues, I believe that to better shape the future we must keep warm the value and the achievement of the past. Indeed, it's very significant this meeting here in Malaga, when in 1989 we had the opportunity to held the 2nd and last world drug conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent. Here, on the same place where we are, we already had the opportunity to discuss in deep more than 30 years ago the big challenges that affect people with drug disorders worldwide, and the role of RCRC in addressing social and health issues in our communities. I hope that the final document of 1989 that was distributed to all of you in hard copy can be of inspiration for these days of discussion.

As you all know, RC/RC International Movement represents the chance to play a positive role in the world, contributing to improve the standard of living of millions, in particular the most vulnerable. 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 million of volunteers in some 192 countries with their premises, equipments and means, always ready 24 a day. 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 set out after intense debates and discussions, especially thanks to Mr Jean Pictet, prominent ICRC figure - which remain unchanged in a world where constitutions and laws do not often last more than weeks or months. 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 is not. 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, 2010, 2020 and 2030 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 have in mind. Voluntary Service is one of the seven Fundamental Principles that guide us 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 – 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 a small 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 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. 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 we cannot 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. Nowadays cooperation is a must and I think that RC/RC can look with interest at competencies and engagement of many NGOs. I would look especially at those representing affected people, whose action have 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.

I believe there is space 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, TB and drugs. 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 who are driven by the 7 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 the network of community-based volunteers that National Societies can bridge the gap between the 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 with drug disorders.

Drug users 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 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.

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 NSs 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 the rapid and excessive staff turnover; many initiatives see the light once, twice, sometimes three times, before sinking into oblivion without any positive feed-back for the Federation and National Societies. Well, I am particularly pleased to remark that this is not the case of ERNA, as demonstrated by this XXII General Meeting. I think that all of you have a credit for this success story, in these years, ERNA, developed as a powerful tool of training and capacity building. Also NSs which have run the 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 NSs 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.

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 and good work to all of us.

**Massimo Barra**  
ERNA President