

CND Vienna 2025

Side event: Clarifying Harm Reduction: A Return to Public Health and Global Well-Being

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for joining us at this side event. Our aim today is to promote a neutral and technical approach to harm reduction, returning to its roots in public health and centered on human dignity and fundamental rights.

Part 1: Opening and Introduction

Harm reduction is finally gaining global acceptance as a strategic approach to addressing substance abuse disorders, after decades of obstacles.

However, it is still often used as a political flag between parties, which distorts its fundamental purpose. This politicization is not beneficial for public health, and is fueled now by the polarization of politics, where HR is undergoing unprecedented cuts and delegitimazation, despite the evidence. Today, we are here to clarify harm reduction as a humanitarian and scientific practice, not a battleground for political ideologies. Harm reduction must be considered as the starting point of treatment for all the persons that use drugs in a pathological way and have become “sick for drugs”

We are considering if, international cooperation, led by organizations like UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS and IFRC, can have a role in guiding the Member States to overcome ideological barriers, based on misunderstandings, prejudice and ignorance and spread the light of science, in a constructive dialogue to foster the adoption of harm reduction (especially in those countries that are still against it).

We are here to explore inclusive strategies to ensure universal, equitable access to treatment and recovery, tailored to diverse cultural, social, and economic contexts.

It is my pleasure to introduce our distinguished panelists, who will share their insights from diverse perspectives, with the hope that our discussion can help to better understand how harm reduction can be protected and clarified (or defined) once and for all, worldwide.

Dr. Nadia Robles Soto - Mexico

Dr. Anthony Omerikwa - Kenya

Ms. Giovanna Campello – UNODC

Ms. Heloisa Broggiato - International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care

Bishop Martin Díaz - Knowmad Intitut / Rome Consensus 2.0

Part 2: Main Statement

As it has been said, despite its growing implementation as an essential measure to mitigate adverse health and social consequences, there remains no universally accepted definition of harm reduction. Instead,

different political and ideological interpretations in different countries and contexts continue to fuel confusion.

This lack of consensus creates fears about the effectiveness of harm reduction, which ultimately harms public health outcomes. For Us, harm reduction represents the first step toward comprehensive treatment and recovery. For others, it is mistakenly perceived as condoning or supporting drug use, as if those promoting harm reduction have abandoned hope for users recovery. Such misperceptions only reinforce stigma and increase obstacles on the access to life-saving services.

From the neutral and impartial perspective of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, harm reduction has been recognized as an essential health strategy since the 1980s, through various international resolutions and guidelines.

After years, the experience and scientific evidence have shown that early intervention, even when a person does not express the will to stop using drugs, is vital. Preventing the point of non-return, reducing the harmful consequences of drug use, and enabling individuals to stay alive and healthy enough to eventually seek recovery. These are the fundamental principles of harm reduction!

Therapeutic goals must be realistic and tailored to the person, considering the individual circumstances. A rapid or forced detoxification cannot be the only measure of success, on the contrary, it can be

counterproductive. Rather, interventions must respect the chronic nature of substance use disorders, prioritizing the well-being and dignity of each person.

Harm reduction is fundamentally a humanitarian practice, guided by compassion and science. It must be seen as the first step within a comprehensive continuum of care that addresses the broader health and social needs of individuals.

How can we return harm reduction to its ethical and humanitarian foundations, free from ideological bias? Is it possible to reach a consensus within the international community?

For this reason I invite all of you to join this open debate and share what HR means to you—and what it is not.

Thank you

Massimo Barra

Chair of the RCRC Partnership on Substance Abuse