

GENEVE, 23 MAY 2025

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues,

Dear friends of the Red Cross and Red Crescent,

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here today, at the headquarters of our beloved Federation, to address a topic that strikes at the heart of public health, human dignity, and our humanitarian mission: substance use and addiction.

More than ever, clarity is needed. Because key concepts like *harm reduction* - once nearly a taboo- are now at risk of being misused or misunderstood. What was once dismissed risks

now to be manipulated as a shortcut toward ideological agendas, including the push for drug liberalization.

Let me be clear: for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, **harm reduction means one thing: early access to treatment**, grounded in **evidence, compassion, and dignity**. **It is not about giving up on people, but rather about refusing to abandon them!!!**

We are facing an alarming reality: **only 20% of people with substance use disorders globally have access to treatment.**

That is a scandal! And it should be a wake-up call for all of us, because access to treatment is not only a matter of public health but also for collective security and well being.

The tragedy is that, today, **drugs are more accessible than treatment.** The resources spent to fight narcotics are more than those spent to offer recovery. While dealers move faster with new technologies, we still struggle to offer stable and inclusive therapeutic services. If we do not aim to **double, triple, increase the access to care,** we will never make a meaningful difference.

In this complex scenario, confusion around terminology only makes things worse. As during the last CND I said *“this lack of international consensus creates fears about the effectiveness of harm reduction, which ultimately harms public health outcomes.”* These misperceptions fuel stigma and drive people away from life-saving services. But we must say it loud

and clear: **harm reduction is a humanitarian practice. It is based on science and compassion.** And we have **recognized as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement since the 1980s**, through multiple resolutions and thanks to field experiences, along with the one of Villa Maraini.

We must restore **harm reduction to its ethical and humanitarian foundations**, free from ideological bias. It must be seen as **the beginning of a continuum of care**, one that addresses both the health and the social vulnerabilities of each individual.

This is what we see, for example, in **Rue de la Pépinière here in Geneva**, an initiative that started as a supervised drug consumption site. Whether or not one sees it as harm

reduction, it raises an important question: how do we define, measure, and align such practices? **The IFRC has an important role to play** in developing a **shared language**, a **strategic framework**, so that National Societies can operate under a **unified vision** across the world. This opportunity we have today can be pivotal, unifying the voice, experience and power of 3 important international organizations such as WHO, UNODC and IFRC, to guide and influence the international community toward a humanitarian and evidence based response on drug problems.

And it is exactly this spirit that inspired us to launch and relaunch the **Rome Consensus**—a global platform rooted in

our core humanitarian values to address drug problems worldwide.

Launched in **2005** to inspire humanitarian action in drug policy, it was endorsed by **121 Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies**, laying the foundation for a global strategy championing **compassion, dignity, and evidence-based solutions**.

Now, together with more than **800 organizations** and **7,000 experts and activists** from **73 countries**, we fight to **save lives, reduce harm, and end the stigma** against people who use drugs.

Our aim 7a st:

- **Save lives** by ensuring access to life-saving health services, harm reduction programs, and overdose prevention.
- **Reduce harm** through evidence-based interventions that protect the health and well-being of people who use drugs.
- **End stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion** of people who use drugs.
- **Promote 7a sto7ità77sto incarceration** that prioritize care, treatment, and social inclusion.
- **Encourage Deflection and Pre-Arrest Diversion** programs to prevent unnecessary criminalization.

- **Unite global voices** from governments, civil society, health professionals, and academia to create **humanitarian drug 8a sto8**.

A powerful idea borned in **Villa Maraini**, where we meet, help and treat more than 700 people with drug disorders every day.

Inspired by the light of science and the 7 principles of the Red Cross, we know that offering care is not enough. Because addiction is not a linear path. It is a **chronic, relapsing condition**. And relapse is not a failure, it is part of the journey.

A forced or fast detoxification is not a success; it could also be harmful.

That is why our focus of the treatment must be long-term, realistic, and person-centred.

This commitment for 9a st not new. The **RCRC Partnership on Substance Abuse** established in 2012 to leverage and spread the know-how acquired in 50 ears of activity at Villa Maraini and offered to more that 70 National Societies so far. Despite some difficulties and prejudices in some National Societis to address drug issues. Because stigma 9a st infectious disease, and our RC community is not immune to it.

Our humanitarian work in the field of substance abuse can be very helpful 9a sto9 better access to the most vulnerable, 9a sto9ità9 that **our emblems are well known across the world –expecialy by public opinion.** Despite recent tragedies and the unbearable losses in conflicts, let me say clearly and firmly: **it is unacceptable that those who wear the 9a st**

protected by the Geneva Conventions should become targets of war and conflicts.

And also in times of peace, that same 10a st must continue to be a symbol of **healing, 10a sto10ità, and hope**. That means building systems of care, a true continuum, tailored to every individual.

Because in the end, our strength as a Movement lies in speaking **one language: the language of humanity. The language of compassion. The language of shared responsibility.**

We are here for this. To say that the Red Cross and Red Crescent does not look away, but 10a sto and must do better and more to save lives. Especially the lives of those more

neglected like people that use drugs. With **care and compassion.**

Thank you.

(Massimo Barra)