

ERNA General Meeting – Athens 2025

Speech by Massimo Barra, Honorary President of ERNA

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today, in Athens, for the XXII ERNA general meeting. I sincerely thank the Hellenic Red Cross for their generosity and commitment in hosting us.

Many years have passed since a few National Societies decided, back in 1997, to join efforts and create a European network to face together the challenges of HIV, and tuberculosis, and later on extend its mandate on viral hepatitis, and drug abuse. I was there, and believe me, it was not easy to gain the support needed to build this initiative that still resist to the big changes and challenges.

Since then, ERNA has grown and has gone through difficult times, but it has never disappeared. While other similar networks in all the continents have vanished, we are still here, alive, coherent, and committed, showing that solidarity and cooperation among

National Societies are not empty words, but a living humanitarian practice.

Today, our Movement faces a terrible combination of crises and emergencies. This makes it even harder to draw attention to our topics.

Yet, at the same time, communicable diseases and drug-related vulnerabilities continue to affect the most fragile people in our communities. Millions of people are suffering and have poor access to health services.

These challenges often come with stigma, criminalization, and political resistance, and these attitudes also influence our people and our leadership that are part of this society. All the diseases we deal with, HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis, and substance use, carry a heavy burden of stigma.

I often say, and I repeat it again, **stigma is an infectious disease!** It spreads quickly, destroys trust, and isolates not only those who suffer, but also, at times, the professionals who work with these groups and bring care.

If I had been an ophthalmologist, a gynecologist, or a pediatrician, I would have enjoyed a much higher level of respect

and solidarity than I do as someone who works with drug users; almost as if I were somehow considered complicit in a behavior despised by public opinion.

Our first mission must remain the fight against stigma within our volunteers and our communities, by spreading compassion and respect for the most fragile people. To develop these feelings, we need our volunteers to go out, to reach and meet the most discriminated and criminalized, and to build mutual trust that can break the fear. To make this happen, we need courage, the courage to act. We cannot just wait for people to come and ask for help at our local branches.

When we remove stigma, starting from within ourselves, we can truly begin to deliver the help that is needed and fulfill our humanitarian mission.

Those who are against this kind of commitment, even within the Movement, do not have the courage to express their opposition openly. They act underground, creating obstacles, as even ERNA has experienced, by constantly demanding bureaucratic requirements, statistics, and numbers. It's a kind of gentle resistance that says "I would prefer not to."

Numbers, however, measure performance — they don't tell stories of relationships. They count hours but not meaning. They record people but not transformations. They fail to capture how the entirety of our activities and relationships helps to dismantle mistrust and prejudice, and ultimately contributes to peace.

I really believe that ERNA represents the pure humanitarian spirit of the Red Cross and truly embodies the essence of the Red Cross mission, because it is not easy to care for the groups we assist, yet we do it with humanity and determination.

Since the 1990s, ERNA has been a space for learning, dialogue, and practical cooperation. We have worked to prevent risky behaviors, to support people living with HIV, Hepatitis and TB, to offer care and dignity to people who use drugs, and to remind that **access to health is a fundamental human right, not a privilege.**

Through our Humanitarian Drug Policy, which I had the honor to promote in every corner of the world, we have learned to put the person before the problem, the human being before the behavior.

That is what makes our approach truly humanitarian. And today, this approach is finally recognized by international organizations such as WHO, UNODC, UNAIDS and by many UN Member States.

In a Red Cross meeting in Strasbourg, I was the first, in the 1980s, to promote the distribution and use of naloxone by non-medical staff, our volunteers and peers on the streets. At that time, it caused many controversial discussions within our Movement. But that life-saving practice was right, and today it is recognized as an essential best practice to address the dramatic crisis of overdoses.

Yet, we still face resistance within our own Red Cross and Red Crescent community to adopt this life-saving measure. This resistance makes us late, and keeps us from achieving our ultimate goal, **saving lives**.

Today, National Societies are under growing pressure, needs are increasing, while funds, staff, and public support are decreasing.

Our volunteers face enormous challenges, sometimes even violence, as the protective power of our emblem is not always

respected, especially in conflict areas. What happened in Gaza in the last years is unprecedented and unacceptable.

This is why we are here, not only to look back at what we have done, but to look forward together and find collective solutions. We must renew ERNA's role and strategy for the next decade.

We must continue to be the bridge between humanitarian values and public health practice, to spread evidence-based solutions through advocacy. And we must remember that our auxiliary role, our community roots, and our humanitarian mandate allow us to act where others cannot. This is what makes us unique and essential in this field.

Even when others may have more resources or expertise, we can make their actions more impactful, by using the reach of our volunteers and the power of our emblem, that is the power of humanity, to access those who are otherwise unreachable.

We also need to recognize that our strength lies in our diversity. ERNA has always been "Eastern-oriented", reflecting the needs and commitment of those National Societies. This diversity of geography, of experience, of approach, is our greatest asset, is our best option: diversity has no alternatives.

Each of us brings a unique story, and together we build a single humanitarian voice that speaks for those who are too often left behind, people who use drugs, people living with HIV or TB, the homeless, and detainees, in a few words, **the forgotten people of our societies.**

I feel a deep sense of gratitude and hope when we meet in person to relaunch our collective action. It is not easy today to find the resources to travel and fund projects: I can see that some faces have changed, but our mission remains the same. We are here to improve our collective goal to restore dignity.

And that mission is timeless, just like the Fundamental Principles that guide us on this road. Let us make this meeting the beginning of a new chapter for ERNA, one that builds on our past, responds to the present, and looks to the future with courage and vision.

And let us not be afraid to raise our voices, even loudly, when our colleagues (on local level) or leadership (at higher level) do not support or believe in what we do.

In all my years of experience, I have learned that **the Red Cross and Red Crescent are more than an organization.** They are a

community of people who choose, every day, to stand on the side of humanity!

And as long as there is even one person ready to reach out a helping hand to someone in need, ERNA will continue to have meaning, and our work will continue to leave traces of humanity in this world.

I wish you all a fruitful meeting, and **long life to ERNA!**