

The Rome Consensus – An Introduction



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I was born in Colombia and for that reason I know very well the drug situation and how this problem affects the individual's life, families and communities. However I'm here to talk to you about the Red Cross and what we do for the vulnerable people.

Before the current drug conventions were even written, in 1922 at the Bangkok Asian Red Cross Conference, the Red Cross was calling for sensible, humanitarian action to tackle drug use. Throughout this historic process, with renewed commitments in the International Conference of Istanbul in 1969 and of Geneva in 1986, the highest governance of the Red Cross Movement has systematically called on the governments to bring their moral and material support to actions fighting vulnerability.

Why the RC/RC should be involved on the fight of drug related suffering?

It is a good question my dear friends: why drugs and not other humanitarian suffering? Since its foundation in 1864, the Red Cross has rigorously followed its core Principles of Neutrality and Impartiality. This is the reason why, today, the Red Cross can work everywhere, in every community, regardless of racial, ideological, religious or political divides.



But the Red Cross has also another fundamental mission: the one of advocating for the most vulnerable people. Far from being contradictory, those forces – neutrality, impartiality and advocacy - if I may call them like this, meet at the point of alleviating human suffering. This is where the Red Cross finds its unique power of humanity.

In the RC/RC Movement, we care about the 600 million people victims of conflicts and natural disasters every year, which is part of our mission, Principles and values;

However, the second major group of people suffering in the world is the drug users, who are systematically stigmatised, discriminated and isolated from society.

Nowadays, more than 200 million people are drug users, worldwide; their marginalisation affects their families, friends and communities and further hampers the civil society's development.

Stigma and discrimination

You know, as well as I do, that stigma kills. Indifference and discrimination kill more than the abuse of substances.

I have never seen so much human suffering and stigmatisation than in drugs. Sadly, a big share of this suffering is caused as much by the repressive policies as the substances themselves. This suffering does not end with the users only; it affects their immediate families and communities at large.

Everywhere in the world, even in countries that uphold human rights, drug users are still denied basic citizen rights. Drug users are humiliated, bullied, discriminated and treated more as criminals than as sick people. Public opinion and well thinking people are often accomplices of this stigmatisation

Discrimination and indifference kill more than the abuse of substances. Moreover, stigmatisation and lack of care for drug victims are unwise and destructive not only for the users themselves, but also for the communities in which they live.

The drug problem affects three major sectors of our society:

- 1) Local economy: Drugs hamper the development of public economy, cause brain drain and curtail public finance resources, producing more poverty and lack of opportunities,
- 2) Human security: Drugs increase violence, especially among young people, and increase public health problems, including the spread of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. This puts pressure on the usually fragile health systems and generates more discrimination and isolation,
- 3) Governance and legitimacy: Narcotics criminalise sectors of society, foster corruption and money laundering, create instability of local authorities and spread corruption at all levels.

The policies developed to tackle drug use too often contribute to make the situation worse. The use of violence against users has no rational or logical basis. Violence engenders more violence and suffering, and ultimately affects the wider community.

In this regard, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement speaks loudly on behalf of the most vulnerable people.

The Rome Consensus initiative of the Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies

The Rome Consensus declaration for a Humanitarian Drug Policy was first signed in December 2005 during the High Level Seminar ‘Bridging the Gap between Public Health and Drug Policy’ organised by the Italian Red Cross and ICOS.

In March 2007, “The Rome Consensus” commitment was strengthened and expanded at the event, the International Think Tank on Drugs, hosted by the Italian Red Cross and supported by ICOS.

The Consensus now commits 106 National Societies of Red Cross and Red Crescent from Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Central and Asia/Pacific.

Our work is based in three strategies:

- Advocacy among the International community, the national governments, authorities and communities
- Peer education and peer activities, especially among young people
- Treatment and rehabilitation (harm reduction activities)

Final remarks

This meeting in Rio provides the opportunity to propose new ideas that make drug policy as a strategic issue to be dealt with at all levels of action.

The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is still learning –and sometimes hesitating – but its fundamental mission to “Promote and alleviate suffering” always shows us the way forward. The Red Cross, but also civil society, always go where human progress and sympathy calls them. When governments fail to follow such a path we will keep moving forward, bringing the warmth of human sympathy to the most vulnerable. Drug policy has lacked for too long this warmth.

National governments and the international community must catch up with this progress at the grassroots level and acknowledge that the time for a humanitarian drug policy has come.

In a globalised world, we all have to mobilise the power of humanity in order to offer sustainable and systematic solutions to a problem as far-reaching as drugs. Today we have the opportunity to establish a new commitment to a humanitarian drug policy based on reason and compassion; one that generates action free from ideology, force, stigmatisation or discrimination.