

## **OUT OF HARM'S WAY**

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While declaring war it is always good to bear in mind that the war can also be lost. The last 30 years of war against drugs - soon turned into war against drug users – show that this war, more and more characterised by repression and violence rather than treatment and rehabilitation, has been either lost or not won.

In dealing with a matter which nowadays affects 200 million people, 10 per cent of them in serious ways, mankind has for long time underestimated the destructive effect of policies more based on law enforcement rather than on public health.

Even the UN antidrug specialised agency, the UNODC, links, in its denomination, drugs and crime, which is self explanatory of the leading approaches in this field at the time of its setting up.

Drug users have been stigmatised and discriminated, humiliated and ill-treated, segregated and marginalised, seen either as criminals or sinners to be redeemed at any cost, even by neglecting their fundamental rights. The outcomes of such policies are evident. The global drugs market has never been more flourishing and profitable, being able to corrupt and bias anybody and anything with its enormous revenues.

Prisons all over the world are filled with drugs users; in my country, Italy, 30 per cent of inmates are detained because of drugs, while in too many parts of the world rehabilitation centres look more like concentration camps rather than places where society take care of drugs addicted, helping them to get out of it.

Today is an important day. With the paper, which is being presented and distributed “out of harm’s way”, the International Federation, inspired by Strategy 2020 slogans “saving lives, changing minds”, and “doing more, doing better, reaching further”, takes, officially and not ambiguously, stance for a humanitarian policy on drugs, evidence-based and free from ideologies and preconceived ideas.

This paper represents a call for action for all RC/RC National Societies which are in the best position for “making the difference” enjoying the trust and respect of both vulnerable people and authorities.

In this AIDS World Day, scientific evidence of best practices carried out in many countries, more and more supported by a conscious advocacy action of numerous National Societies, show the great effectiveness of harm reduction strategies in preventing the infection, which could spread not only among the IVDU, but also among other drug users such as cocaine-addicted, via internal nasal injuries caused by the “white powder”, or amphetamine/cannabis users, via more uninhibited and non protected sex behaviors favored by these substances.

If the percentage of new infection cases among the IVDU in Italy has decreased from 74,6 per cent in 1985 to 7,7 per cent in 2008, it is because of harm reduction policies: in this period individuals treated with either methadone or buprenorphine have increased more than twice much, while street units and “low threshold” centres have developed strategies such as needles exchange and peer education.

These policies produce empowerment, which replace segregation and humiliation: harm reduction and substitution therapies give power because they enable drug users to live an acceptable life, without relying on others.

Even if outcomes achieved in terms of well-being and also in terms of HIV infections, are excellent - and not repeatable for other illnesses prevention strategies - the way ahead is still long and hard. Drugs users are not beloved by public opinion, at least as long as a son, a nephew or a relative obliges the family to share his daily tragedy. But international trends are changing: efforts of those willing to develop harm reduction approaches in their own countries are now supported by international institutions: UNAIDS, UNODC, who, global fund unanimously underline the need of new policies in favour of drugs users for doing more, doing better, reaching further.

A different policy is possible, as claimed by the declaration of the “Rome consensus for a humanitarian drug policy”, a manifesto committing 121 National Societies. In the last years representatives from these societies have met many times in Spain, Italy, Uganda, Philippines, Capo Verde and Grenada to help the International Federation in setting out and promoting these strategies, best depicted in the presented paper.

A humanitarian harm reduction policy is also a policy, which decreases violence in our cities and towns because violence brings violence and mankind does not need aggressive and violent treatments for drugs users. As the UNODC former director general said “even if drugs kill, I do not believe that we need to kill because of drugs” and “too many persons in prison, too few persons in health services, too few money for prevention, treatment and rehabilitation”.

Before passing the floor to Philippe - a young man who directly tested the drugs negative effects, but who was able to get out of it, becoming a positive resource for our National Society – let me allow to retrace some personal experiences which represent a sort of testimony on the development of the drugs phenomenon in the last 35 years.

In 1976, in Rome, in the so-called Red Cross city, I set up Villa Maraini, an antidrug centre which, since then, has welcomed more than 35.000 drugs addicted who have found listening and therapy tailored on their needs and motivation.

Since its beginning, in a room where a group of Red Cross professionals and volunteers provided assistance to few drug users, the centre has grown up into a wide range of services delivered to about 700 drugs users per day, 5000 per year.

Our action mainly focuses on building trust with drug users. That brings us into contact with some of the society's most marginalized - including 30 per cent of drug users ignored by other agencies because irregular migrants. We have learned that any drugs addicted, even the most inveterate and apparently hopeless can get well when his crazy love for substances will be run out.

Former drug users reintegrated into society, many of them become Red Cross volunteers, are fundamental in that kind of intermediary work, especially in difficult environments, such as "the streets". Approximately one third of our 80 staff members are former drug users. Active outreach, peer education and a flexible approach to treatment are fundamental to the Villa's unique ethos.

More than 30 National Societies from all continents and Federation people have attended Villa's periodical training, bringing back impression and know-how in their own work contexts. In this way Villa Maraini has *de facto* become a reference centre on drugs for the Federation, even though it has never been formally acknowledged as such.

Also, on the basis of these comparisons among different experiences, the Federation secretariat has conceived the presented paper, resulted from the work excellently coordinated by Dr Getachew Gizaw who, together with the health department, has to be thanked for the powerful work tool we have been given. We can truly make the difference and it is in the interest of governments to use National Societies in their own countries in order to reach social marginal fringes which can be hardly reached by institutions.

A well known drugs addicted is always a matter, dangerous for himself and the others, but an unknown drugs addicted is even more dangerous. This is a good reason for national societies to get more involved in prevention, therapy and rehabilitation "doing more, doing better, reaching further".