

“Underlining the importance of Humanitarian Diplomacy”: Chairman Massimo Barra brings the experience of the Rome Consensus to the XV ERNA General Meeting

From 23 to 26 September 2011, the XV ERNA General Meeting was held in Slovenia, hosted by the Slovenian Red Cross in the Red Cross Youth and Health Resort in Debeli rtič. The theme of the meeting was *“Humanitarian Diplomacy, HIV and TB”*.

Established in Rome in 1998 with the aim of coordinating the sharing of experiences, transfer of best practices and the promotion of collaborative efforts among National Societies of the European region, the European Red Cross Red Crescent Network on HIV, AIDS and TB currently gathers 40 National Societies from Europe.

The meeting saw the participation of 62 representatives from 25 National Societies of Europe and Central Asia, the IFRC Europe Zone and Geneva offices, GNP+ (the Global Network of People living with HIV and AIDS), the Belarus PLHIV network, WHO, UNODC, and other partners.

Dr. Barra also took part in the meeting, delivering a speech on the experience of the Rome Consensus, and chairing a session focused on the role of coordination and partnerships in the Red Cross Red Crescent’s work in Humanitarian Diplomacy.

“The first ERNA meeting was held in Rome in 1998, when representatives from 12 National Societies active in the fight against HIV and TB decided to unite to tackle such challenges together” remembered Dr. Barra, who was himself elected President of ERNA that year, and held the appointment until 2003.

“At first there were resistances among them. Some people said: *‘such problems are quite different from the RCRC traditional fields of action’*, others said: *‘Maybe it’s not our competence’*. But we finally decided we had to do it. In such context a solid professional background and sensitivity are needed.”

“The Rome Consensus for a humanitarian drugs policy aims at bringing drug policy to the forefront of global concerns, and advocating for a comprehensive and better humanitarian approach to drug use” continues Dr. Barra “In the past, it was selected by the EU as a privileged partner to adopt a humanitarian approach to drug policy. New entities can join and find their place in it, and this happens without corrupting the identity of Red Cross Red Crescent, because these new actors have to comply with the Seven Fundamental Principles. For some time, we considered working side by side as a risk of breaching the Seven Principles, but now time has come to take such possibility into consideration.”

Discussing about the role of Humanitarian Diplomacy in addressing HIV, TB and drug use, Dr. Barra comments: “Some problems still exist: like the concept of Humanitarian Diplomacy itself. Is that a new concept? Is advocacy any different from it? Humanitarian Diplomacy means reminding authorities that they must work respecting human rights and the Seven Principles. But we still have torture in many countries in the world. Even in countries which say they respect human rights. We must fight to remind all states and governments of the need to adopt a more humanitarian approach. Advocacy remains a fundamental part of Humanitarian Diplomacy: it means to speak on behalf of vulnerable people.”

Enriched by the presence of external speakers, case studies from National Societies and panel discussions, the meeting provided a useful moment of reflection on the state of affairs in the Europe Zone with regards to the work being done in humanitarian diplomacy on HIV, TB and drug use by National Societies with their respective governments, as well as policy- and decision-makers.