



**Key note speech by Dr. Massimo Barra**  
**Chairman Rome Consensus Initiative and Italian Red Cross**  
**Gala Dinner offered by the Senlis Council to deliver the Award for**  
**innovative Drug Policy, Vienna March 12, 2008**

Dear Friends,

It's a great honour to speak on the occasion of the 51st Session of the United Nations' Commission on Narcotic Drugs to the participants of the gala dinner organized by the Senlis Council to award the Australian Red Cross for its innovative program on Drug policy called "**Save a mate, SAM**"

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 in the field of substance abuse.

Between 1979 and 1993, an international group of experts of the Red Cross/Red Crescent met 10 times in different parts of the world, producing a series of guidelines which have helped National Societies start their activities in this field and which still remain a powerful, evidence-based and rationale source of inspiration for all of us.

Substance abuse and harm reduction are a very sensitive field of action. As UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa said on Monday, *“Scientific evidence shows that drug addiction is an illness that can and must be treated. There are no ideological debates about curing cancer or diabetes, Left and Right are not divided on the need for treating tuberculosis or HIV. So why are there political contrapositions about drugs?”*

All over the world, ideological prejudices and pre-judgments continue dominate the political debate. It is like the story of Red Riding Hood, Cappuccetto Rosso in Italian, who, crossing the wood of temptation, meets the bad wolf – or drug dealer - and gets addicted, until the good hunter saves her live by organizing a therapeutic community and eventually providing her with a certificate... More than 30 years working in this field demonstrated me that reality is not as simple,as a fairy tail..

In “Spreading the light of Science”, a recent document on harm reduction related to injecting drug use published in 2003, the International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies calls on the international community to be “guided by the light of science, not by the darkness of ignorance and fear”.

But what exactly a harm reduction strategy is? A harm reduction strategy is the opposite of a harm increase strategy, which humiliates, mortifies, criminalizes and stigmatizes drug users, producing negative effects both at the individual and public health levels, as well as at the social one.

A harm reduction strategy opposes the wrong ideas that punishment and deprivation are the right answers to the problems of the more than 200 million drug users worldwide, 25 millions of which are considered by Mr Costa’s report as “hardcore drug addicts”.

In this regard, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement speaks loudly on behalf of those who can be considered as the most vulnerable ones...

And I am very happy to quote Mr Costa again, when he says that *“Drug control has an image problem: too much drug-related crime; too many people in prison, and too few in health services; too few resources for prevention treatment and rehabilitation; too much eradication of drug crop, and not enough eradication of poverty”* and finally, *“although drugs kill, I don’t believe we need to kill because of drugs.”*

The Red Cross could have not expressed its opinion in a better way in its documents of the “Rome Consensus for a Humanitarian Drug Policy”, which was launched in Rome in December 2005 by the Italian Red Cross with the support of the Senlis Council.

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

The Consensus now commits 107 National Societies of Red Cross and Red Crescent from Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific, basing their actions on three key points:

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

It is the first time in the history of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement that substance abuse and drug issues are taken from a bottom up approach, in which National Societies, which are the governance of our Movement, are forcing the Management at our Secretariat in Geneva to follow them.

I can understand the concerns of our Secretariat, worried that National Societies could expose themselves too much and enter in a difficult political issue such policies on drug abuse are.

But if it is true that the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has to follow the Fundamental Principle of Neutrality, it is also true that the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement can not be neutral in front of human suffering and discrimination.

Together with the Senlis Council and the Italian Red Cross, the Spanish Red Cross organised last week in Barcelona the III World Red Cross Red Crescent Congress on Humanitarian Drug Policy. More than 60 National Societies from all over the world committed themselves to continue their efforts in order to reduce the human suffering caused by drugs, adopted the guidelines for humanitarian drug policy activities and approved the Declaration which has been distributed at the CND here in Vienna, this week.

### **Award to Save a Mate SAM- Australian Red Cross**

Let me now say a few words on tonight's award winner project Save A Mate, SAM, created and implemented by our friends from the Australian Red Cross.

SAM began in Australia in 1999 to help young people come out of their youth relatively unscathed, in a period in which heroin overdoses became a serious problem for young people.

*Save a Mate* provides young people with simple but effective health promotion information and first aid training on literally how to save themselves or a friend – be it from the dangers of social exclusion from drug addiction, the danger of overdose or simple advice on how to consume alcohol and drugs as responsibly as possible.

National governments and the international community must catch up with this progress at the grass root level and acknowledge that the time for a humanitarian drug policy has come. In a globalized world, we all have to mobilize our power of humanity in order to offer sustainable and systematic solutions to a problem as wide-reaching as drugs.

Thanks a lot to all of you for your presence at the gala dinner, to the Senlis Council for organising this ceremony Award and congratulations to the Australian Red Cross for its great program SAM.