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Good morning! I would like to thank you, Mr. Chair, and the Vienna NGO Committee, for giving me this opportunity to speak about the drug-related crisis faced by society in my region, Central-Eastern Europe. This crisis is not caused by drug use itself. It is driven by bad drug policies, based on a faulty assumption that we can make our societies drug-free by punishing people who use drugs, instead of supporting them to stay healthy and alive.

In most of the countries of the region, the majority of injecting drug users belong to deprived and marginalised communities. It is important to understand that for them, harm reduction services, such as needle and syringe programs, are not only about reducing the negative consequences of drug use, such as infections and overdoses. For them, harm reduction is not just an extra option on the menu, not just the first step to recovery. For them, harm reduction programs offer the only opportunity to be treated as a human being - and sometimes the only chance to stay alive. During the early years of this century, thanks to international assistance from the Global Fund, Central-Eastern Europe made huge progress in building up a harm reduction system of care and support.

With great sadness, I have to report that this system of care and support is now collapsing in most countries of the region, due to the retreat of international donors and the lack of funding and support from member states. The UNGASS outcome document required member states to provide HIV prevention interventions in accordance with the WHO's technical guidelines. In most countries of our region, however, provision of these services has dropped dramatically since 2016, and now qualifies as extremely inadequate in terms of those guidelines. Sadly, this is a typical example of failure to invest appropriately, where international commitment by member states is not translated into action, and inaction leads to death and suffering.

My organisation, the Rights Reporter Foundation, specialises in making movies. We have for many years been documenting this crisis on our website, Drugreporter. We have filmed how the crisis evolved, and how programs have faced shutdown in Hungary, in Montenegro, in Serbia, in Russia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Romania and others. In recent years, almost all the needle and syringe programs in these countries have closed down. We have filmed how HIV and hepatitis C epidemics broke out as a consequence. I can show you graphs of growing infection rates - but graphs don't show the whole picture. The purpose of making movies, was to allow us to look beyond the numbers, and bear witness to human stories of suffering in the shantytowns and ghettos of our cities.

The international drug control system was created with the declared intention of promoting public health. But most of the people who inject drugs whom we interviewed have never been afforded the same opportunity to make healthy decisions about their lives as most of us who are sitting in this room. Most of them live in poverty and are dealing with multiple social and psychological issues, from homelessness to childhood trauma. They are the living reminders of the moral failure of our societies to treat every human being with respect.

Harm reduction is not the opposite of abstinence or recovery. It is about supporting people, where they are at, as fellow citizens in need of help, and treating them with respect. Not as problems to be solved, but as part of the solution. By producing films about harm reduction among vulnerable people, we came to realise that for them, abstinence is often not a real choice. To ask someone who lives on the street to quit drug use is like asking

someone with one leg to ride a bicycle - or asking a traveler to give up his hat in the desert. Repressive policies based on the idea of fighting a war on drugs are pushing vulnerable people deeper into a vicious circle of poverty and drug use. They don't need our sermons and judgment - they need our support to stay alive and healthy, and they need it where they are at. Unless we bring harm reduction services to people where and how they need them, our investments in treatment and recovery will be wasted. Without harm reduction, the road to recovery is a road that leads nowhere. It is a stairway without steps. The dream of a drug-free society might be a positive dream for many - but the dream is a nightmare for those who, in the name of an unachievable 'drug-free society', are denied access to live-saving services.

Some people say there is a funding crisis for harm reduction. I don't agree. A funding crisis happens when governments don't have the money to deal with an issue. In this case, governments *do* have the money, but they choose to fritter it away on implementing repressive laws to punish people for trying to ease their pain. Every year, we spend billions on arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning people. Harm reduction programs cost a small fraction of the money required to arrest and imprison people and unlike punishment, they produce positive effects. I urge all member states to quit their dangerous dependence on repression - and instead, use their resources to keep people healthy and alive. Thank you for your attention!