

Welcome speech by Marieke van Schaik, Secretary General of the Netherlands Red Cross, at the Forum *MHPSS Building the Resilience of Young adults during a time of crises*, Rotterdam, Friday 30 September 2022, check against delivery

Dear colleagues and friends,

In 2021, 18% of the children and young adults between the age of 12 and 25 in the Netherlands was mentally unhealthy, according to the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics. Let's think about that for a moment. *1 in 5*. And we are talking about a Generation Z in one of the happiest and wealthiest countries in the world. Imagine what that could mean for children and young adults who are in a less comfortable position anywhere else in the world...

This is why I am so happy that I can welcome you all here today, as host of this forum on behalf of the Netherlands Red Cross. Today we will discuss the important topic of building mental resilience of young adults during times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has of course negatively affected the statistics on mental health. I have seen it myself, as mother of three young men in the age of now 17, 21 and 23. I've seen their struggles and I've heard the stories of depression, self-harm and eating disorders amongst their fellow students and friends.

At a time when your social life is almost all that matters, it suddenly came to a halt. No school, no bars, no sports, no parties. Luckily, we left the times of lockdowns and curfews behind us in this country. But I doubt that this 1 in 5 figure will improve, given the stressful future perspectives for Generation Z. Political instability, economic uncertainty, an energy crisis, climate change and conflict in Europe with even a nuclear threat.

We are gathered here in Rotterdam today with over 60 colleagues. 60 colleagues working in the field of psychosocial support, from Red Cross or Red Crescent societies in Europe, Central Asia and elsewhere. It's great that we can meet again in person, after almost three years. And it is important and urgent that we meet. That we share insights and experiences.

The pandemic has taught us a lot. For a while, we lost a lot of things we were used to, like our freedom to move, and our freedom to meet others in person. Many people had to deal with the loss of jobs and income security. Many of us had to deal even with the loss of loved ones, the fear of the illness and the continuous worry about the wellbeing of family and friends. But we also had vast amounts of time to reflect on what is important in life. We had time for our children. We showed resilience.

Children and young adults were among the groups that were hit very hard by the pandemic. As I mentioned at the beginning of this speech, we noticed during the pandemic that the mental health of many young people deteriorated, more than in other age groups. Young people indicated more often that they were stressed, anxious or had other mental issues. As a consequence, they felt lonely or had less solid social contacts with others. Stagnation in

their social development was regularly mentioned by young people as a negative effect of the pandemic.

Two weeks ago, another study, done by Utrecht University, showed that the percentage of Dutch girls between the age of 12 and 18 with mental health problems increased from 14 to 33%. 1 in 3. Many of them reported behavioral problems, hyperactivity and concentration problems. Again, covid19 is a big influencer, but the researchers fear that this negative trend does not end with the pandemic. The issue of climate change, for instance, might have a great impact on the mental health of next generations.

This young generation inherits a vulnerable world, in which they hope to realise their hopes and dreams. But the lack of an untroubled future perspective is a shadow over these hopes and dreams. I believe that we, as Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, can be a beacon of hope for Generation Z.

An important lesson from this COVID19 crisis is acknowledging the perspectives and needs of young adults. As it is our mission to help the most vulnerable in times of crisis, we need to acknowledge and incorporate this in our strategies and operations. It is important to ask ourselves: are we really listening to young adults? What are they telling us and asking from us? How can we help them to become more resilient in these challenging times? We can not only help young adults to become more resilient – we can also offer them a possibility to be actively engaged in building a better world. For humanity, individually and collectively, and the global ecosystem we are part of.

Apart from mental problems caused by disaster, we should also look at the mental problems caused by conflict. And at what we can do to help young people to address those problems. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia is at our doorstep and impacts young citizens across Europe and Central Asia. But most of all of course on next generations in Ukraine and Russia itself. Many of you are part of the humanitarian response.

We also see teenagers and young adults from vulnerable conflict areas in Africa and the Middle East looking for hope in Europe, leaving their home without any safety nets nor sufficient means. In many cases, they do not get a warm welcome at their destination.

Unaccompanied minors face extreme insecure situations on the migration trail. Often without food, shelter and access to medical and psychological care. Some of them will finally reach Europe and stay in asylum centers; others might have to survive by themselves and with peers who are also seen as 'undocumented and illegal' by local authorities.

This summer in this country, we started to experience a large failure of governmental systems that are meant to take care of people that ask for asylum. Hundreds of people, including many young adults, had to sleep in open air without sufficient access to medical care, food and sanitation, because there was no place for them in government shelters. This situation is inhumane and we have put a lot of effort into providing assistance as well as advocating for minimum standards.

Dear colleagues and friends,

Facing all these crises and the humanitarian needs that are caused by them, we have to ask ourselves: how can we help young adults build their resilience? The first step towards an answer is to listen to them. As Netherlands Red Cross, we recently asked our Youth Think Tank Mental Well-being to investigate why young people in mental distress are unable to ask for - and find - the right psychosocial support. And what we could do to help solve that problem.

Young adults from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds have made it clear to us that there is still a big taboo among young people to admit to having mental problems. You will probably recognize that – every teenager will tell you they are fine when you ask for it – although it is clear they are not. Apart from this taboo, young adults also have the feeling that no one is listening to them anyway and that they're the only ones facing these issues.

As Red Cross Red Crescent, we have an answer. We can and should use the Psychological First Aid methodology in order to rebuild the connection among peers and facilitate honest and open conversations. During the pandemic, we aimed one of our campaigns towards youth. We found out that promoting connections by only an 'old fashioned' phone call, did make a change for many young people.

We can also actively break the taboo by openly talking about mental problems ourselves. Our so called student desks have created podcasts on mental health, encouraging young Red Cross volunteers to start conversations with peers and sharing their personal experiences. Talking about mental problems is a first step in opening up for further help.

Humor should also be an essential ingredient in our approach. It can be used to relieve tension and anxiety and I believe you will see an example of that during this forum.

Last month, we adopted a new Youth Strategy at the Netherlands Red Cross, in which we aim to increase the involvement of young people. We want to learn from them, we want to offer them opportunities for personal development, because we want to help them stay healthy, physically and mentally. Their involvement is highly relevant for our national society. It makes us future proof.

Let me conclude by wishing you a lot of inspiration and useful new insights. We have some very interesting experts here today, who I would like to give a very warm welcome:

- Renet van der Waals (Coordinator Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in crises from the Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs),
- Ea Suzanna Akasha (Technical Advisor of the IFRC Psychosocial Support Centre), and
- Fleur Monasso (Manager, Capacity Strengthening and Partnerships, Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre)

It's really great to have you here, we look forward to your contributions.

Colleagues and friends,

Let's work hard on how we can strengthen the mental resilience of next generations. Rotterdam is probably the best place in the Netherlands to do that. This city was heavily bombed during the Second World War. But it fought itself back on the world stage and became one of the most entrepreneurial, diverse and innovative cities in the Netherlands. Let's work on resilience together. I wish you a fruitful forum.