

Interim Activity Report March-July 2004

During the period March-July I have been able to keep to the original time schedule and implement the majority of the planned activities which were as follows:

Meetings/communication with potential mentors / key informants

During the period March-May I had meetings with the following local authorities: the Director of the Armenian National AIDS Center; the Director of the Narcology Clinic of the Psychonarcology Center; the Director of the NGO "AIDS Prevention, Education and Care" which is currently implementing one of the pilot OSI funded harm reduction projects in Armenia; and the project coordinator of the Southern Caucasus Anti Drug Programme. I also had several meetings with Alexander Busel who is a UNAIDS International Consultant and a steering committee member of Central-Eastern European Harm Reduction Network and has practical experience coordinating harm reduction projects in Belarus.

The primary purpose of meetings with the aforementioned persons was to explore their attitudes towards harm reduction, their relevance as possible mentors of my project and their willingness to take responsibility for that. However, I used the meetings as opportunities for primary data collection as well (see further in the report). One of the Deputy Ministers of Health, Tatul Hakobyan who is currently responsible for coordinating policy and program development as well as international cooperation and reforms, was kind enough to work as my mentor.

At the same time I was communicating electronically with my international mentor Matthew Curtis in order to refine the scope and the plan of the research. To get more details on my mentors, please see the index page of my website www.policy.hu/markosyan

Participation at Seminar in Budapest

The seminar which was held at the Center for Policy Studies during the last week of March was quite useful since for me it was the first official training in policy research. I learned how to carry out policy research and write policy papers. Discussions with the lecturers and with the representative of the International Harm Reduction Development Program helped me to refine the objectives and the plan of my project. I was able to meet also with the Director of Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, who was kind enough to answer my questions concerning activities of the Union in the area of Harm Reduction as well as provide very useful documents developed at the Union.

Research-related activities

a) Identification and collection of information sources

Since the project aiming to explore the policy environment, surrounding drugs, drug users and their HIV risk, has been entirely new for Armenia, it was important to identify and collect as a comprehensive set of information sources as possible. All kinds of electronic and printed resources which could provide background information and the data for desk research were considered. The collected resources included but were not limited to legal documents, resolutions, position papers, research articles, books and mass media articles on drugs, human rights and HIV in general and for

Armenia in particular (see the full bibliography in the draft research paper at my website www.policy.hu/markosyan). . The search for information sources was done through Internet and at libraries, statistics departments and documentation centers of relevant organizations in Armenia and Budapest. The organizations which were visited with the purpose to collect sources of information included but were not limited to: in Budapest - the European University and the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union; in Armenia - the national library; the United Nations; the American University of Armenia; Yerevan state University; infectious diseases, drugs, legal and statistics departments of the Ministry of Health; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Social Security; Ministry of Justice; National Center for AIDS Prevention; Narcology Clinic; centers for policy analysis; and documentation centers at a number of international and local non-governmental organizations.

Review of the literature for providing background for the research paper

The Section “Background” of the draft research paper provides sufficient evidence for the following:

- 1) Injecting drug use is one of the major risk factors for HIV epidemics in general and in Armenia in particular.
- 2) There are two approaches in responses to injecting drug use, drug users and HIV infection. The first of these is a law enforcement approach. Emphasizing criminalization and containment, this approach identifies police action, interruption of trafficking, and penal institutions such as prisons as pivotal to effective response. The law enforcement approach has failed to address the drug use problem globally. Moreover, in those countries of the former Soviet Union and Asia where injecting drug use is the primary mode of HIV transmission, this approach fueled the HIV epidemics. The second approach emerges from a public health framework.. It focuses on the risks rather than on the drugs themselves, considering both adverse health effects and the range of people affected. It seeks to identify the tools and interventions that might best contain adverse health effects among the largest number of people. This approach called “harm reduction” has been effective in containing and even reversing HIV epidemics in several countries.

Desk research

Desk research includes the following:

- 1) *De jure* assessment of policy environment surrounding drugs, drug users and HIV in the countries of the former Soviet Union in general and in Armenia in particular. *De jure* assessment was done through review of all legal documents available at Internet or libraries. For assessment of the situation in Armenia, the only available comprehensive IRTEK database of all Armenian legislation was used.
- 2) *De facto* estimate analysis of the real situation with the drug and HIV-related law enforcement and the state of affairs with human rights of IDUs. The analysis was done using relevant qualitative and quantitative studies. In the face of lack of such kind of data for Armenia, special attention was paid to the data, concerning situation in other countries of the former Soviet Union where such kind studies were carried out, e.g. Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and countries of Central Asia. The latter were used to draw parallels and identify issues to be explored in Armenia.

Primary data collection

Since for *de facto* analysis of the situation in Armenia the secondary data were not available, it was planned to explore what is going on in practice through interviews with key stakeholders. Basing

on the results of the secondary research, demonstrating the state of affairs in other countries of the former Soviet Union, issues to be explored in Armenia were identified. Several field guides were developed for interviews with different groups of key informants. Overall, 15 key informant interviews were planned for and carried out during the first part of the fellowship year. The rest of the primary data collection is planned for the second part of the fellowship year.

In addition to the planned primary data collection, I got a chance to collect some extra data. In May I participated at a training seminar on substitution therapy, which was organized by the OSI. Virtually all participants of the training (overall 26 people) were people in charge of drug and HIV issues, including high level officials from the MOH. I used this opportunity to conduct a short survey. I also had a chance to collect some primary data on the *de facto* situation in Baltic and Central Asian countries through communication with lecturers of the training seminar.

The primary research identifies not only the deficiencies of the legislative framework, but also reveals the social, economic, political and cultural context of drug issues in Armenia. Importantly, the research also aims to reveal the extent to which drug issues have been subject of study in Armenia, how much they are part of policy-making process and what they mean for IDUs.

Networking and working meetings

Based on the previous and newly identified contacts I managed to make a mapping of most active institutions and agencies relevant for this stage of research, ways of current and future collaboration and channels for networking.

The organizations and individuals contacted/interviewed during the first period of the fellowship year included:

- Southern Caucasus Anti Drug Programme, focal point in Armenia;
- "Drug abuse monitoring system (DAMOS)" project in Armenia;
- Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia;
- The Principal Recipient (World Vision –Armenia) Implementing Unit of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria;
- Psychonarcology Center of the Republic of Armenia;
- Armenian National AIDS Center;
- NGOs which are currently implementing needle exchange pilot projects, including AIDS Prevention, Education and Care NGO; Antidrug Civil Union NGO; and Armenian Red Cross Society;
- Ms. Anahit Simonyan, the UNDP program officer responsible for HIV issues;
- Ms. Anahit Papikyan, the Coordinator of health programs at OSI – Assistance Foundation-Armenia;
- Dr Alexander Busel, UNAIDS International Consultant, a steering committee member of Central-Eastern European Harm Reduction Network;
- Dr. Emilis Subata, the Director of Vilnius Center for Addictive disorders;
- Mr. Kestutis Butkas, the Leader of Self-help Drug Users Group Organization from Vilnius;
- Dr. Tynchtynbek Asanov, the Director of the Republican Narcology Center and the Chief Narcologist of the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Participation at conferences/seminars

- On March 17 – attended the presentation of the Newsletter of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia entitled “Observer: Human Rights in Armenia”. The publication of the periodical is sponsored by OSI – Assistance Foundation-Armenia and OSI Justice Initiative.
- On March 19 – attended the forum to discuss women's role in the fields of Foreign Affairs, Politics, Business, Media, and Law which was organized by the Public Affairs Section of the United States Embassy in Armenia.
- On March 23 – attended the panel discussion “HIV and the women” held at the American University of Armenia.
- On May 18-19 participated at a training seminar entitled: “Substitution treatment as an effective approach towards opioid dependence treatment and HIV/AIDS prevention” organized by OSI – Assistance Foundation Armenia.
- On June 9-12 – participated at Tobacco Control Training Seminar, organized by OSI – Assistance Foundation Armenia.

Anticipated activities

Overall, I am going to keep to the original plan of the project. However, after analyzing the results of the first part of the project and discussing them with the mentors, a series of the initially envisaged project activities have been modified to allow effective examination of the issue and to fit into the research objectives.

- 1) In order to assess the *de facto* situation with the law enforcement and the abuse of human rights of IDUs, I am planning during the upcoming months to do the following:
 - to interview with representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the police, the representatives of the penitentiary institutions and the IDUs;
 - to analyze the criminal records of people convicted for use of drugs;
 - to explore the overall IDU situation in penitentiary institutions.
- 2) I included in my plan an extra activity which will be organizing a discussion on the issue in one or two of the following formats (whichever will be feasible):
 - a panel discussion at the American University of Armenia
 - a talk show at one of the most popular TV channels
 - a seminar.
- 3) I will use any other opportunity to participate at meetings concerning the issue and collect primary data through them

Publication/presentation of data

In local print media in English language:

Noyan Tapan Highlight (Noah's Ark)

Another article is forthcoming to be published in the journal AIM

Another article is going to be published in Newsletter of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia entitled “Observer: Human Rights in Armenia”.

An abstract will be submitted to the IHRA annual conference

Conclusions

Overall, the research proceeded in a satisfactory way. However not all-available literature on

Armenia in terms of drug, drug users and HIV has been yet reviewed and analyzed for the research. Throughout the project more information will arrive for analysis, which will consequently be integrated into the draft research paper and refined at a later stage.

The project encountered several limitations with respect to collection of primary data. Besides the collection of the rest of the primary data has been planned for the second part of the fellowship year. Therefore, although the preliminary research is indicative of some of existing problematic policy issues, however at this point the **Policy Paper** cannot be materialized. It will be prepared and uploaded to my website later when the research will be finalized.