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IN GEORGIA, THE NEW NATIONAL PLATFORM FOR DRUG POLICY WILL PROMOTE DIALOGUE AS WELL AS ADVOCACY

In Georgia, at the end of April, the Georgian Drug Users Community Group (GeNPUD) established a National Platform for Drug Policy. The platform brings together 33 entities representing NGOs providing services, other civil society organizations, unions, research organizations, and drug user community groups.

GeNPUD is a network of organizations of people who use drugs.

The platform provides opportunities to discuss issues related to the harms caused by Georgia's repressive drug policies, and to propose evidence-based public health and social programs to mitigate the harms. The platform is setting up thematic working groups to discuss various issues. For example, there is a policy reform group that will propose changes to existing laws. There is also a group working on awareness raising and issues of stigma and discrimination.

The platform will also be used to develop advocacy strategies. Various members of the platform will raise funds to support the work of the platform and will conduct advocacy campaigns. They will propose laws, talk to government, organize protest meetings and other events, sensitize society, etc.

The advocacy campaigns are expected to operate on multiple levels, and to focus on the liberalization of the drug policy; the promotion of the evidence-based interventions; and ensuring access to vitally important medical and psycho-social services – access from both a financial and a geographical perspective.

The advocacy campaigns will also aim to raise awareness among specific groups and in the general

population of the harms created by existing policies, in the hope that this will help to reduce stigma and discrimination. Ultimately, the members of the platform would like to see drug use treated as a public health issue rather than a criminal one.

The impetus for the national platform comes entirely from the community. GeNPUD itself is a community group established in 2013 by the Georgian Harm Reduction Network with support from the Global Fund dating back to the rounds-based era. GeNPUD hopes that the platform will be a vehicle for carrying on the work of drug policy reform after Round 10 funding ends later this year.

For example, some progress towards decriminalization was achieved when in the summer of 2015 the Georgian government amended its law to distinguish between possession with and without the intent to sell. However, representatives of the drug users community believed that the amendment did not go far enough – for example, it did not establish amounts for personal use that were acceptable. The National Platform for Drug Policy will become a place where issues of this kind can be thrashed out and new policies and strategies developed.

Paata Sabelashvili, a representative of the White Noise Movement, one of the co-founders of the platform, said that the platform will be available to everyone who is adversely affected by repressive drug laws regardless of their pattern of drug use. Previously, advocacy campaigns were more segmented – for example, focusing on the issues affecting injection drugs users in one instance and the issues of non-injection drug users in another.

There are no members from government in the National Platform for Drug Policy. However, the National Centre for Disease Control is listed as a partner and supporter. And the government has pledged to work with the platform.

Archil Talakvadze, deputy minister of Internal Affairs, said that his ministry is always ready to discuss issues related to drug policy reform with community representatives. The drug user community in Georgia believes that the Ministry of Internal Affairs often reflects the views of more conservative organizations and persons influenced by the old Soviet approaches promoting stigma and discrimination of drug users. The community hopes that the work of the National Platform will persuade the ministry to consider other approaches. The Georgian government has shown itself to be more willing to listen to the views of civil society than the governments of other post-Soviet countries.

Up to now, the policies of the Georgian government have sometimes been contradictory. The government co-funds opioid substitution therapy, which suggests that it understands that drug use is a public health issue. At the same time, however, it has these very restrictive laws criminalizing drug use.

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