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▪Reproductive Health Initiative for Youth in the South Caucasus

By Tike Giorgadze



Sandra Roelofs at the official launch

NGOs.

The United Nations Population Fund launched its three-year regional project Reproductive Health Initiative for Youth in the South Caucasus (RHIYC), on June 13.

The official event was attended by the First Lady of Georgia, Ms. Sandra Elizabeth Roelofs, as well as governmental representatives from Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and a number of diplomatic missions to Georgia, international organizations and Georgian

The First Lady of Georgia opened the event by welcoming the guests and underlining the importance of the program's implementation for the women and youth of the three Caucasus countries.

"Reproductive health is one of the important issues of the new millennium because the mortality rate among women and children has recently increased significantly in Georgia and we are trying to fight against this problem. We are focusing on women, youths - I am personally involved in the process of forming a Georgian women's group - and with the assistance of the UNFPA our ability to reach goals in this area is greatly increased," Roelofs said on June 13.

Tamar Khomasuridze, the United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) assistant representative in Georgia expressed her gratitude towards the project's donors - the European Union and the United Nations Population Fund - for funding and supporting the initiative.

"We have a long and successful experience of collaboration and partnership with these organizations, whose efforts in support of the development process in Georgia deserves the highest appreciation," Khomasuridze said on June 13.

She also welcomed the Inter-European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (IEPPFD), which is a project partner, and expressed the hope that collaboration with these organizations would strengthen the project's contribution to the policymaking process.

Ms. Khomasuridze described the health problems currently being faced by the population - and the youth in particular - and underlined that the regional project would facilitate development and a deepening of cooperation between the three neighboring countries of the South Caucasus.

"Taking care of the education, health, and welfare of the young generation is one of the most important priorities of the Georgian government," Khomasuridze said.

"We believe that implementation of this project will result not only in an overall improvement of the reproductive health of the country's young people but we also expect to see such long-term results as the empowerment of the youth, and an increase in their participation in the public sphere, which will facilitate the strengthening of democracy in the country," Khomasuridze stated on Tuesday.

The EC/UNFPA RHIYSC is a large-scale, multi-partner project funded by the European Union and the UNFPA. It developed through the active participation of youth in three Caucasus countries - Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The project aims at building national capacities and regional partnerships to improve the sexual and reproductive health status of youth in the South Caucasus. The main target group is youth ages between 15 and 24, including the most vulnerable youth.

"The European Union is pleased to be able to support the Reproductive Health Initiative for Youth in the South Caucasus with a grant of 2.5 million Euros. This project is financed through a specific thematic budget line, which was created by the European Commission in addition to its principal financial and technical cooperation instruments," Federico Berna, Head of Operations of the delegation of the European Commission in Georgia said at the June 13 project launch.

He mentioned that the first steps have been taken towards achieving the goals adopted by the International Conference on Population and Development and the UN's Millennium Development Goals in the three Caucasus countries.

"The health problems young people face in the region today are numerous and challenging. These include unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and exploitation," Berna said.

The Deputy Minister of Health of Armenia Tatul Hakobyan represented Armenia at the event and he stressed that the average age of an individual's first sexual intercourse has declined in the last 20 years worldwide, including in the three Caucasus countries, and "because young people today are typically entering puberty at a younger age and getting married later than in the past, they face a longer period between sexual maturity and marriage."

He added that universal access to reproductive health, including family planning, was the starting point for a better future for young people and the RHIYC program would allow the three countries to better focus their efforts on improving the reproductive health of youth in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia.

"Our government remains fully committed to being at the vanguard of the regional response to common problems and the Ministry of Health will provide all assistance required to institutionalize these services in the healthcare system," Hakobyan said on Tuesday.

The Chief Gynecologist of Azerbaijan, National HR Coordinator Faiza Aliyeva talked about the situation in Azerbaijan in regard to the sexual and reproductive health of young people and stressed that the segment of the population targeted by the program was the most vulnerable, the least protected, the least informed and the least accessible for governmental institutions.

At the same time she stated that a state program on reproductive health has been successfully implemented in Azerbaijan over the past 10 years, although young people have not been accessible as a focus group in the course of the program's implementation.

"This is also confirmed by the fact that 84 percent of young people do not use modern contraception. Therefore we can see a trend in which abortion rates are increasing among young people," Aliyeva explained.

She pointed out that the problem was very significant for the government of Azerbaijan and during more than 10 years international organizations including UNFPA have been working in this field.

"The Ministry of Health has been the main strategic partner of the UNFPA in the implementation of these programs in the field of reproductive health since 1995. It was an effort of the Ministry of Health with the support of the UNFPA to establish the National Reproductive Health Office in 2000, which has been acting as a coordinating body of all the reproductive health programs implemented by international organizations in Azerbaijan and is currently continuing its performance," Aliyeva stated at the event.

The launch event was followed by a photo exhibition entitled "Youth through Youth eyes" dedicated to youth problems.