



## “Drug Demand and Harm Reduction in the Islamic Republic of Iran”

Funding Source:  
German Federal Republic  
Term: 2003-2004

### Project

The project aimed at strengthening the ability and technical capacity of NGOs in Teheran to plan, implement and monitor drug demand and harm reduction measures. The project supported NGOs working directly with addicts (i.e. focusing on Afghan refugees) and drug users who engage in high-risk behaviour. The project was funded by the German Federal Republic, additional funding being provided by UNODC for one of the project's components.

Given Iran's long border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, its Eastern provinces are situated on major “Golden Crescent” drug smuggling routes. Opium and heroin are both easily available and relatively inexpensive. The largest concentration of drug addicts is found in Teheran.

One partner organisation chosen for this particular project, Persepolis, was identified by GTZ together with the Iranian Ministry of Health to carry out the project in two districts (Ghar and Bagh-eh-Azari) in South Teheran, where a very high and concentrated prevalence of drug use exists.

The harm reduction approach was chosen due to GTZ having gained positive experiences with this approach in various other countries and due to the absence of such efforts in Iran so far. Harm reduction aims at preventing the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases as well as death from drug injection (through overdose).

The project was also destined to improve awareness of the drug-use problem and to focus on various methods (e.g. syringe exchange, condoms, etc.) as first steps to harm reduction versus severe prosecution.

It was identified as important for the project to primarily support younger adults and teenagers

### Drug situation in Iran

- Iran is the world's largest consumer of opiates (especially opium and heroin)
- Officially, two million people are using opiates regularly; experts estimate that the prevalence is twice as high
- Drug treatment options and services are inadequate
- Iran is currently facing a remarkable growth in the number of HIV/AIDS cases, transmission through injecting drug use accounts for almost 75% of all HIV cases.

with drug and HIV/AIDS prevention measures, and adults (with special emphasis on women) with drug treatment and harm reduction measures.

The main objective of the project was to establish outreach activities for high-risk populations in the districts Ghar and Bar-eh-Azari to reduce risk behaviour among street injecting drug users and sex workers.

Secondary objectives were to gain access to highly excluded vulnerable people, to encourage drug users to seek treatment and to carry out research into drug use prevalence and patterns of consumption and criminal behaviour in this area.

### The main components of the project were:

- Capacity building/training of staff
- Establishment of a drop-in centre
- Needle and syringe exchange (NSE)
- Outreach activities
- Basic health education
- Data collection on HIV prevalence among injecting drug users (IDUs)



## Impact

The main achievements of the project were the successful establishment of a drop-in centre and the initiation of outreach work in the streets of the two districts. In addition, Methadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT) was offered and supervised by two nurses and one doctor.

## Outreach

Newly hired outreach personnel were trained in basic knowledge on HIV/AIDS and drug-related issues. The outreach work was conducted through a peer-based approach, meaning that the outreach staff mainly consisted of former drug users or drug users on MMT. The staff was trained in conducting outreach activities, collecting data on IDUs and in carrying out a rapid situation analysis based on ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews to collect information about the level and patterns of drug use among the target group.

The actual outreach work consisted of contacting and registering mainly homeless drug users in parks, on the street and other deserted places, providing harm reduction and HIV/AIDS counselling, needle/syringe exchange, condom distribution and wound dressing. The peer-led approach succeeded in increasing the contact time of the outreach personnel with a usually highly marginalised target group.

## Community-based drop-in centre

One of the aims was to establish community-based drop-in centres (DIC) in the south of Teheran near the target groups to provide counselling, and necessary treatment (i.e. HIV-tests) free of charge. It was crucial for the project to gently gain acceptance by the communities and to show the benefits especially in this area of town, where refugees mainly gather. The drop-in centre was set up to provide voluntary medical examinations, information on risky behaviour, needle/syringe exchange, access to the MMT programme or referral to local treatment clinics, condom distribution, HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B/C counselling and testing, as well as provision of food, clothes and washing facilities.

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During the project, demographic data of clients was gathered which showed a high HIV prevalence rate (31% in 2003). This showed the importance and relevance of intervening quickly and on a long-term basis.

Due to their lifestyle and addiction, drug addicts often face barriers in accessing social and health services or avoid seeking such services because they fear stigmatisation. Reaching out to drug users by employing outreach workers who enter drug users' communities, was a novel strategy in Iran. The project was very successful, which was partially demonstrated by the target group showing a high interest in the measures offered, demonstrating a clear need for this type of services. A large number of clients came forward to get sterile syringes/needles and condoms, which can be traced back to a higher awareness of HIV/AIDS risks.

The NGO Persepolis has received considerably positive feedback from international experts and media highlighting the project's unique contribution to promoting the health of an otherwise highly excluded and vulnerable population in Iran.

In January 2005, the success and importance of harm reduction was officially recognised by the Iranian Head of Judiciary stating that all judicial authorities should abstain from charging those who are active in this field with the criminal offence of facilitating drug taking. The international community and drug organisations in Iran have highly welcomed this statement.

## Lessons learned:

- Harm reduction is an effective method of preventing HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users (IDU)
- Harm reduction is often the only way to reach the vulnerable and marginalised group of drug users
- Pilot measures at local level can be an effective tool in advocacy for adopting harm reduction measures at national level

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