

UNDERMINING CORRUPTION

DIRECT CITIZEN ACTION IN ARMENIA

by Chad Vickery and Peter Kaufman

IFES instructors Armenuhi Nikoghosyan and Karen Manucharyan arrived in the village of Daranak, Armenia, on Feb. 6, 2002, to organize a discussion group on local self-governance (LSG) with residents. As this was their first visit to Daranak, they came prepared with their standard LSG agenda, but they hoped, as always, that the residents would steer the discussion toward their own local issues, problems, questions and complaints. Nikoghosyan and Manucharyan soon discovered that the residents of the village, located on the southwestern bank of Lake Sevan in Armenia's Gegharkunik region, had a genuine grievance to voice. The discussion began as planned, with a presentation of IFES publications on local self-governance and everyday legal issues, but participants quickly turned the discussion to a local concern—excessive fees charged for the registration of newborn children.

EXCESSIVE FEES FOR BIRTH CERTIFICATES

The instructors pressed the citizens for more information. Several participants mentioned that officials at the Civil Status Registry had charged 17,000 drams, or approximately \$30, for issuing birth certificates. This fee was well beyond the means of the village residents, and they believed that it was far more than the official legal fee. The IFES instructors seized on their concerns, pleased that the residents had identified a local problem and appeared poised and determined to solve it. Nikoghosyan and Manucharyan promised their support, provided that the community would take the proactive step of forming an initiative group to address the issue. This critical step, through which citizens mobilize to take concrete action in response to a locally defined problem or concern, represents one of the most important and successful elements of the IFES civic participation program in Armenia.

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WORDS TO DEEDS

Nikoghosyan and Manucharyan are two of the 22 civic education instructors in IFES' Citizens Awareness and Participation in Armenia (CAPA) network, an IFES program that promotes the rule of law through research, advocacy and coalition-building at the grass roots. IFES Armenia instructors work in eight of Armenia's 11 *marzes* (provinces) and are trained to lead discussions on a variety of topics ranging from government structure to community development. They encourage civic initiatives in the areas of advocacy, community building, good governance and local development. CAPA instructors are trained to identify hot topics that may surface during this discussion process. In particular, instructors are looking for issues that, if properly nurtured and realistically defined, can lead participants to move from words to action. Since April 2001, CAPA instructors have conducted this “words to deeds” process with 32,000 people in 321, or 35%, of the communities in Armenia.

In an effort to develop a locally defined holistic approach, the CAPA project reflects Thomas Jefferson's republican ideal of direct citizen action at the township level. The work feeds from local initiatives and is implemented by local instructors, all of whom reside in the regions in which they work. These close ties ensure a deep understanding of the society they are assisting and foster respect and trust between IFES staff and clients.

170 TIMES THE LEGAL FEE

In the case of Daranak, residents had raised a concern that triggered a flurry of activity. Nikoghosyan and Manucharyan returned to their field office to investigate the issue. Unable to find the needed information through local resources, they traveled to the IFES headquarters in Yerevan, which serves as the hub of the CAPA network, to research the law. Using a legal database, they discovered an enormous discrepancy between the sum that the Civil Status Registry demanded and the fees specified in the national Law on State Duties and Fees. Local government officials were charging Daranak residents more than 170 times the legal registration fee of 100 drams, or approximately 17 cents.

In March, Nikoghosyan and Manucharyan presented this information to Daranak residents at a meeting of the newly formed initiative group. The instructors worked with residents to develop a step-by-step plan to address this issue. Shortly after the meeting, the village mayor joined the group on a trip to the Civil Status Registry Office in Vardenis, where they made their verbal appeal about the inaccurate fees and left a copy of the law with the officials. About a week later, the Civil Status Registry agreed to issue certificates for all births and

marriages for the proper fee. Moreover, the list of legally defined fees for different registration services is now posted on the door of the Vardenis Registry Office, which serves more than twenty communities in the district.

ADMINISTRATIVE LAW AND DEMOCRACY

The illegal pricing scheme in Daranak highlights the rule of law as a crucial component in the development of a successful, vibrant democracy. One of the essential elements for the development of the rule of law is an informed and engaged citizenry and the fair and effective enforcement of the law. Knowing what the law is and then enforcing it is a fundamental step in promoting a rule-of-law culture and addressing corruption. As the recent 2002 IFES CAPA survey illustrates, Armenians are generally disillusioned with their legal institutions and skeptical about the existence of the rule of law in their country. This profound lack of confidence in the legal system is compounded by attitudes toward corruption in the country. Eighty-eight percent of the population thinks that corruption is a serious problem in Armenia, yet there is a strong sense of resignation to the problem, as 84% of the population accepts corruption as a fact of life.

DEMOCRACY: GOOD GOVERNANCE, RULE OF LAW, ELECTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

IFES has learned from its long experience with the CAPA project that once local groups identify an important issue and break it down into small, achievable steps, they tend to participate enthusiastically in the efforts necessary to address the problem. The CAPA network provides the mechanism

required to engage Armenia's citizenry in an array of issues falling broadly within four areas that comprise a healthy democracy: good governance, the rule of law, elections and civil society.



Above all, the CAPA program is designed to be flexible. As the example of Daranak village illustrates, the CAPA method of informing and empowering citizens can address a wide range of issues, such as ensuring law enforcement, confronting corruption and guaranteeing good governmental practices. Other examples of CAPA success stories include securing telephone connections, developing housing units, renovating kindergartens, updating voter lists, establishing NGOs and community foundations, and conducting large-scale volunteer actions. The CAPA project ensures that the citizens of Armenia receive the information, support and tools they need to effect change, assume responsibility for their future, guard against poor governance and corruption, and safeguard the representative nature of their local and national government.



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