

Sticking together to achieve change

Lali Bandzeladze

Project manager, “APRA Georgia”, Tbilisi

Project: Georgian Network for Family Groups Dealing with Mental Health

“APRA Georgia” was established in April 2006 to bring together the families of people with mental health problems. Its aim is to support and educate families dealing with mental health, develop mutual support groups, influence social opinion and lobby for changes in the mental health system. “APRA” is the only family organisation in Georgia.

The idea of the project was to disseminate APRA’s knowledge and experience and support the establishment of new family groups in Georgia. The project involved developing family support groups in Georgia’s regions (Telavi, Batumi); informing families about their rights and about various strategies for coping with stress; publishing and distributing informational bulletins; capacity-building for family groups through the training of their members; educating field specialists to change standard methods of dealing with mental health problems; collaborating with media representatives; holding round table discussion and meetings with different social groups; and arranging an art exhibition.

The exhibition of art by people with mental disabilities took place within the project framework. The range of artworks presented was really impressive and showed clearly the creative potential of people with mental disabilities and their rich inner world. All the local media were present and covered the events.

Other events within the project such as workshops, roundtable discussions and exhibitions gave us the opportunity once more to raise public awareness of mental health issues, draw the attention of policy-makers to policy reforms and disseminate new knowledge among professionals and families. All these are important to achieve the final goal: the re-integration of people with mental disabilities into society.

As a result of our activities, representatives of the media and local communities are inspired to help transform fear and negativity into respect for human dignity and tolerance for those who are different. The exhibitions attracted public attention to people who can successfully fulfil their potential and be worthy contributors to the creation of socio-cultural values. The media contribution helped to draw the attention of policy-makers and community representatives to the problems of the mentally ill and their families, and motivate them to push for constructive changes to the situation.

The issue of the establishment and development of family groups and their involvement in mental health care is quite complex in Georgia nowadays. The economic situation and social attitudes make progress difficult. But above all it is the lack of knowledge and experience of working in organisations that hinders the mentally ill and their families in Georgia. During our meetings we tried to show participants various ways of getting involved and developing organisations.

The greatest challenge we encountered during the project was users' passivity and their family members' unwillingness to participate in self-help groups. Due to the stigma involved, family members feel shame, are irritable and are not very keen to communicate.

We expect that the knowledge and information gained will help people with mental health problems and their relatives to increase their sense of responsibility, their ability to work in a team, their ability to make independent choices about what they like and what they don't like, and the ability to express and defend their own point of view in future discussions.

We hope that the initiative groups of family members will be able to continue its work and create a wider network in future.

We found that when we brought together the efforts of several NGOs to force policy-makers and other key stakeholders to change their attitude towards the mental health care and community support we can get the desired results. Though it is long process and needs constant efforts from our side.

Contact

Lali Bandzeladze
lalibandzeladze@yahoo.com