



Project Summary

Urgent action is needed in Estonia and Romania to prevent the further spread of HIV and Hepatitis C among drug users and it is thoroughly documented that community-driven harm reduction strategies are hugely efficient in stopping these epidemics.

The project "Integration/SAFER-IDUs" will contribute to **scaling up** the outreach projects targeting drug users already set up by the local non-governmental organisations ARAS in Romania and AIDSI-TUGIKESKUS in Estonia :

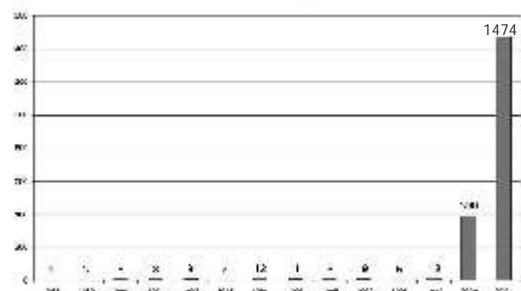
(1) by sharing the lessons learned in the field in the four countries - between both outreach workers (internships) and political decision makers (inter-country visits).

(2) by fostering informed public debate about drug use and its related health risks, in Estonia and in Romania (Think Tanks) as well as on a pan-European scale (multilingual newsletters).

(3) by integrating standard research strategies to evaluate the ongoing pertinence of the outreach projects that are set-up in Romania and Estonia (Focus-Groups followed up by Questionnaires for service recipients).

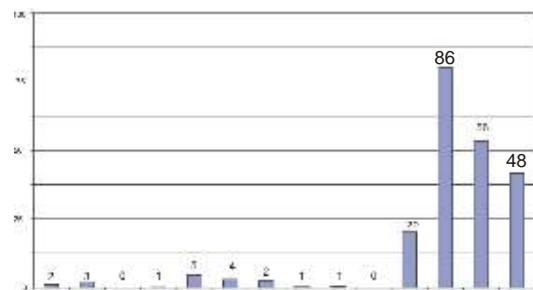
The **Integration/SAFER-IDUs** project, focused on reducing health damages provoked by the use of drugs, will complement the already existing **Integration Project** (www.integration-project.org) which brings together leading HIV/AIDS organisations from the European Union and from seven EU applicant countries (funded by DG SANCO). Finally, the Integration/SAFER IDUs project has been reviewed and "strongly recommended" by UNAIDS

NEW HIV CONTAMINATIONS PER YEAR in ESTONIA (1988-2001)



HIV CRISIS: Just like in Russia and in Ukraine, the HIV epidemic in Estonia is recent, explosive, and driven primarily by intravenous drug use (source UNAIDS)

NEW HIV INFECTIONS among Drug Users in Finland (1988-2001)



In nearby Finland, on the other hand, the proper steps have been taken to counteract the HIV epidemic among drug users.



Catalina ILIUTA from ARAS : Drug users in Romania, so far, have been only little affected by HIV yet risk-behaviors remain very common: harm reduction services need to be urgently streamlined.



Detailed description of activities

Key Facts:

Total cost of the project:
264 317,98 EUROS

Funding provided by the European Commission:
(Grant Contract External Aid 2002/031-329 - DG Enlargement)
211,454,38 EUROS
(80% of eligible cost)

Beginning of Project:
May 29, 2003

Duration of Project:
24 Months
(until May 28, 2005)

A/ Internship in France and in Finland for managers of Harm Reduction Projects (Objective 1a)

20 internships for managers of outreach projects for drug users in Estonia and Romania will be organised as part of this project - to be organised as follows:

2 participants from Romania and 4 participants from Estonia will participate in a 5 day internship to be set up in Finland.

5 participants from Romania and 5 participants from Estonia will participate in a 5 day internship to be set up in France.

A further 2 participants from Romania and 2 participants from Estonia will participate in an internship which will specifically include a training about social research (Focus Group Management and Questionnaire Analysis), which will take place in France.

On one side, the internships will include continued presence and participation in a harm reduction site in Finland or in France -which stands as a most concrete way to learn the practices on how drug users who come are informed and supported. On the other side, of course, a set of standard theoretical issues will be covered with the participant in the internship:

=> Promoting participation of drug users in the health services which concern them

=> The specifics of injecting equipment: to prevent HIV and hepatitis C contamination, drug users need to use not only clean needles and syringes, but also clean cups (used for mixing the drugs) and clean filters (used for loading up the syringes)

=> The specifics of substitution treatment : buprenorphine and methadone treatments are now widely used in Finland and in France.

=> Legal issues concerning drug use and harm reduction: at first, the implementation of the laws which prohibit the use of drugs often leads to direct problems for managers of harm reduction services (The typical extreme example is when members of the police wait near harm-reduction projects to arrest drug users...). But both in Finland and in France, compromises have been agreed upon over time so that harm reduction projects can play their full role (such compromises may include legal reform or simply changes in practices for members of the police force).

=> ethical issues regarding Harm Reduction: as a public health intervention, harm-reduction need to fully abide with standard medical ethics.

=> Other potential benefits of harm reduction: if Harm Reduction is recognised mostly for its efficiency with regards to HIV or Hepatitis, it can also bring other benefits: decreases in number of overdoses, better self management of drug consumption, better social integration of drug users.

=> The situation in Prisons: across Europe, several projects have been successful to protect the health of drug users in Prison. This issue will be most pertinent for the Estonian participants as it is documented that a large part of documented HIV cases concerns inmates.

B/ Visits in France and in Finland for decision-makers from local city-councils or governments (Objective 1b) from Romania and Estonia. 8 visits in total will be organised.

2 Estonian and 1 Romanian representative will go to Finland.

2 Estonian and 3 Romanian representatives will go to France.

In France and in Finland, the visits will be arranged by AIDES and by the Finnish AIDS Council respectively. The programme for each visit will include meetings with decision makers who are directly involved with Harm Reduction issues (for instance, the Regional Council Members for the Paris region who are in charge of Health Issues, or the HIV/AIDS special adviser to the mayor of Paris), as well as on site visits of some of the key projects which outreach to drug users.

C/ Publication of two multilingual newsletters. (Objective 2)

Original text in English / Printed in English in 2000 copies.

Other language versions (French, Russian, Estonian, Romanian) made available only in PDF format so as to limit production costs. All will be made available on a section of the www.integration-project.org website dedicated to the Integration/SAFER IDUs project.

The switch from ignoring the health needs of drugs users to supporting the implementation of wide scope harm reduction services is a historical step which must urgently be taken by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, if we are to become able to stop the HIV/AIDS catastrophe which has already fully impacted Russia, Ukraine and Estonia since 1998. We consider it essential therefore that the achievements (and the difficulties) during this project be fully documented and made easily available.

With 12 pages, each newsletter will contain about 10 articles of 500 words each. The target groups of these newsletters will be political and institutional decision makers specifically in Estonia and Romania but also across Europe. Indeed, opposition to providing health services to drug users is most often fuelled by lack of knowledge about the documented huge successes of harm reduction strategies and to misconceptions and fears about drug use and drug users. But when provided with pragmatic and documented evidence, public opinion (and the opinions of public officials !) can change.

The contents of these two newsletters will be defined and reviewed by the four members of the Coordinating team. The first issue will focus upon illustrating the variety of initiatives which have been set up in Estonia, France, Finland and Romania to mitigate health damages provoked by drug use. The second issue of the newsletter - to be published towards the end of the project, will present the results of the Focus Group and questionnaires studies, carried out both in Estonia and in Romania.

D/ Setting up of NATIONAL THINK TANKS and production of consensus statements (in Romania and in Estonia / Objective 2)

Through this project, ARAS in Romania (who is already one of the co-initiators of the Romanian Harm Reduction Network / www.rhrn.ro) and AIDSI-TUGIKESKUS in Estonia will bring together key actors in the fight against HIV with human rights activists and other stakeholders - which will form for each country a national Think Tank. Each Think Tank will have at least 6 members, will meet at least 3 times through the duration of the Integration/SaferIDUs project and produce at least three consensus statements about drug use, associated health risks, and what can be done to mitigate these risks. In order to foster inclusiveness and pertinence, participation of People Living with HIV and of drug users (active or former) of both genders in these think-tanks will be highly promoted.

The detailed description of the criteria that will define membership in the Think Tanks is described in the section on methodology.

E/ Social Research about the needs and the profiles of the drug users who use the services set up by ARAS in Romania and AIDSi-TUGIKESKUS in Estonia (Objective 3)

If there are some general principles which are well known regarding what makes harm reduction work (for instance the joint statement on drug use published by the European Coalition Change in 1999, available on www.change-europe.org), the services themselves need to be adapted as much as possible to the local contexts and to the specific needs and profiles of the population concerned. The types and the quality of products consumed by drug users are very different from one region to another. Injection techniques can also vary significantly. This is why we consider it important to integrate a part of social research as part of this project.

E1. The focus groups: once the people in charge will have been formally trained (see activity 1: internships), they will set up one focus group in Estonia and one in Romania. Each group will have between 6 and 10 participants, recruited among the users of harm reduction services (no more than 10 participants so that the conversations can be open and as free as possible). One person will be in charge of chairing the group (to make sure the subjects to be addressed follow a pre-defined list). Another will be in charge of listening and taking notes.

One of the key challenges of the Focus Groups is the analysis of results. The whole point is to be able to perceive new issues raised by the participants, instead of just the preconceived ideas the organisers of the focus groups already have in mind.

E2 Questionnaires: Harm reduction services are still very new in both Romania and in Estonia and that is why we believe it is extremely important that surveys be carried out so as to identify the profile and the knowledge of the service recipients. We will then be able to perceive the evolution over time of the degree of knowledge or maybe changes in injecting behaviours when such surveys will be repeated - which will stand as one crucial way to evaluate the effectiveness of the services. The questionnaire will be designed on the basis of surveys already carried out in France and in Estonia. They will be first tested on small groups of drug users - just to make sure they are manageable and that the questions are well understood. Once fully validated and tested, these questionnaires will then be administered to about 150 persons per country (Romania and Estonia).

F. Inter NGO Coordination Team:

Finally, to make sure all of the activities planned as part of the Integration/SAFER IDUs take place in the best way possible, a small inter-NGO coordination team will be set up which will meet three times throughout this project. The Coordination team will have four members (the global coordinator and one member per partner NGO).

The first two meetings will take place in Bucharest and in Tallinn, so that the global coordinator (from France) and the coordinator from Finland can have the chance to meet local staff members who work on the issues of harm reduction. The last meeting, which will be focused mostly upon evaluating the whole partnership, will take place in Paris.

The partners of the Integration/SAFER IDUs Project:

AIDES

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AIDES, one of largest community-based organisation against HIV/AIDS in Europe started to confront the HIV crisis among drug users in 1985. Today, within AIDES, 50 staff members and 50 volunteers provide harm reduction services for drug users across France.

Contact: Arnaud WASSON-SIMON
(coordination of INTEGRATION SAFER-IDUs)

AIDSI-TUGIKESKUS

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AIDSI-TUGIKESKUS is already a leading provider of Harm Reduction Services for drug users in Estonia and a leading advocate for the urgent implementation of an adequate response to the current HIV crisis in Estonia.

Contact: Jury KALIKOV

ARAS

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ARAS is a well established NGO against HIV/AIDS in Romania which has recently initiated its own harm reduction initiatives for drug users but also has co-initiated the Romanian Harm Reduction Network - which brings together 9 Romanian operators involved in harm reduction.

Contact: Monica DAN

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Following a sharp and sudden increase in the number of HIV transmissions among Drug Users in Finland in 1999, the Finnish AIDS Council advocated successfully for the urgent implementation of Harm-Reduction Projects. **This recent and well documented success-story will be essential to promote changes in practices regarding health and drug use in Romania and in Estonia.**

Contact: Jari KESANIEMI

Public presentation of the SAFER-IDUS Project - June 2004

