



**Anticorruption Conference  
15 December 2008  
Yerevan, Armenia**

**Report**

**Overview**

Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) organized a closing conference in the final stages of its two-year “Government, Civil Society and Media Participation against Corruption” program, funded by the United Nations Democracy Endowment Fund (UNDEF) and USAID. The conference was designed as a forum to present the program’s successes and the obstacles encountered, but also, more importantly, to discuss ways forward. EPF hosted the conference on December 15, 2008 in the Ball room of the Congress Hotel in Yerevan, with the participation of more than one hundred people. Participants included representatives of diplomatic missions, international and donor organizations, state agencies, media outlets and civil society organizations.

The program aimed to increase the roles of Armenia’s government, civil society and media in the fight against corruption. Throughout the program, EPF identified and worked with a number of partner NGOs and Media outlets. Three NGOs implemented projects with EPF grants to increase civil society monitoring over government activities and spending. The projects focused on watchdog activities in civil service recruitment and attestation, road traffic and local governance. Additionally, four partner media outlets were awarded grants by EPF to implement projects on anticorruption reporting, freedom of information issues and transparent governance on the municipal level. The Conference brought together these and other partners for a summative discussion of the results achieved and lessons learned during the two-year program.

The program’s strategy arose from discussions involving many of the same participants in 2006, during an international Anticorruption Conference conducted by EF and hosted by the Armenian National Assembly.

The 2006 conference outlined a set of recommendations which later on were developed into the “Government, Civil Society and Media Participation against Corruption” program.

The Conference began with welcoming remarks by George Zarubin, EPF President.

An opening speech by the US Ambassador in Armenia followed. Her Excellency Ambassador Marie L. Yovanovitch thanked the participants for their commitment to the struggle against corruption and reminded everyone that this social evil is present in any developed society, but the courage of the citizens who fight it makes a difference.

“Corruption is not about evil people doing bad things. It is an all too human problem that occurs wherever there is a sense of entitlement, opportunity, and a belief that the consequences are limited. Corruption is a difficult and complex challenge, but one that can be overcome through our collective effort to fight against it.”

-US Ambassador Marie L. Yovanovitch

Mr. Manvel Badalyan, the head of the Civil Service Council of Armenia, also addressed the participants. He expressed his gratitude and appreciation for the work carried by a group of NGOs monitoring the work of the Civil Service Council. Mr. Badalyan emphasized the importance of transparency and participation for any public governance body and expressed his readiness to continue cooperating with the NGO monitoring group in the future. “We have initiated serious reform in the system, which can hardly be achieved without a proper study of the relevant international experience and involvement of serious international expertise. We hope that our cooperation with the Eurasia Partnership Foundation is just starting with this program”, said Mr. Badalyan in his address.

Following the opening session, six thematic working groups were formed. Each working group was facilitated by an expert and consisted of, on average, ten participants.

**Group #1** focused on preventing corruption at the community level and was facilitated by Sara Petrosyan, program manager of Hetq Investigative Journalists NGO.

The group discussed the difficulties that community members face when dealing with local government entities (such as heads of communities, cadastre, and local registry offices) and ways to mitigate the risk of corruption at the local level. At the end of the day the group came up with a long list of concerns and needs for the local government sector in Armenia. These needs have been further developed into action objectives by the group members. The group suggested that *in order to create transparent and participatory governance on the community level, prospective programs should focus on procurement procedures by local government entities*. In particular, the law and relevant regulations on the distribution and sale of community property should be made public locally, and relevant demand-driven adjustments should be made to the current legislation governing these sales. This will also increase public control over the work of the local officials. The group also strongly recommended decreasing the artificially expanded number of local officials in order to eliminate bureaucracy. Eventually a mere publication of simplified community budgets (presented in an adapted format which is easily understandable to the public) would increase participation and trust in the work of the local governors.

**Group #2** focused on the obstacles to implementation of the Freedom of Information Law and was facilitated by Levon Barseghyan, the President of the Asparez Journalists Club. The group discussed the dilemma of Freedom of Information in Armenia: even though the law guarantees the right to information, poor understanding and improper implementation mean that citizens are often denied that right by state agencies. A number of organizations work today to create or strengthen the position of Information Officer in public administration bodies around the country, which will be responsible for freedom of information requests and dissemination of information. Meanwhile one of the major problems identified by the group was *the lack of competent and motivated information officers in the country, coupled with a lack of public awareness about their right for freedom of information*. The group proposed feasible solutions for the problem: they suggest a comprehensive educational initiative for information officers, and efforts to ensure that these officers issue regular country-wide reports on the implementation of their functions. They also suggested civil society organizations pay close attention to strategic litigation concerning the enforcement of the Freedom of Information Law. Among the routine activities that could enforce the implementation and impact of the law would be continued “bombarding” of officials with information requests facilitated by experienced NGOs and monitoring of government responses (or lack thereof) by community-based organizations.

“Based on the feedback coming from civil society, we have initiated eight amendments to the Law on Civil Service, which has minimized the human factor in recruitment and attestation processes.”

-Manvel Badalyan, head of the Civil Service Council of Armenia

**Group # 3** dealt with decreasing the risk of corruption in the judicial system and was facilitated by Karen Zadoyan, head of the Armenian Young Lawyers Association. Donors and international organizations implement several projects to reduce corruption in the judicial system. The group discussed why numerous problems persist despite these efforts, and outlined potential new strategies for addressing the problem. As different from a number of sectors, like the traffic police, civil service, consumers' rights and local governance, the judiciary still lacks strong participatory involvement from civil society. One of the major problems identified by the group was the lack of public confidence and trust towards the judiciary. The group suggested *increasing the "legal conscience" of the public by promoting wider access to court decisions, as well as publication of success stories and best practices*. Selection and recruitment of personnel was also determined to be crucial in ensuring an evolution of the judiciary in Armenia. The group recommends that the salaries of principal decision-makers in the judicial system (judges, associations) be substantively increased and the process of selection be transparent and under the close control of civil society.

**Group #4** was called "The culture of corruption in Armenia" and focused on public acceptance of corruption in Armenia. The group tried to answer questions like "Are Armenians accustomed to corruption as a part of their everyday life?" The group was facilitated Nouneh Dilanyan, head of the NGO Mijnaber. The group came to the conclusion that corruption is an outcome of the general apathy and obedience commonly found in Armenian society. Public perception of the corruption situation in the country is pessimistic and based on negative experience. Therefore, the group resolved that *the public should be better educated on means of recourse and appeal for victims of corruption on all levels which exist in the country*. The group also recommended a massive promotional campaign on success stories in this regard.

**Group #5**, entitled "Human Rights and Corruption," discussed citizens' awareness of their rights and ways to succeed in having those rights upheld. The group was lead by Arthur Sakunts, head of the Armenian Helsinki Association of Vanadzor. The group expressed concern about the lack of public demand for the defense of human rights. This may be explained by a lack of public awareness and participation in decision-making processes. The group suggested that more civic initiatives be launched in the area of human rights protection with emphasis on the problem of corruption. Long-term monitoring with an active participatory approach was suggested as a possible solution. The group *emphasized the importance of the Ombudsman's office and suggested close cooperation between civil society and this office in addressing public complaints*. Despite skepticism about the impact of public hearings and round tables initiated by local non-governmental organizations, the group came to the conclusion that these tools are still a valuable addition to any public awareness campaign.

**The 6<sup>th</sup> Group** focused on the role of civil society in the fight against corruption. It was led by Amalia Kostanyan, head of the Transparency International Armenian Chapter. The group came up with a list of recommendations on the role of civil society in the fight against corruption. The recommended actions could start with increasing the general public's understanding of the importance of a sustained civil society in ensuring transparent governance, and should go further, with organizing hotlines and public consultations. The group suggested that permanent contacts be established with political parties on the parliamentary level in order to push reforms developed by civil society. Civil society organizations could also facilitate installation of the international best practices concerning transparent governance and civil society monitoring. *The government procurement process was identified as a major focus of civil society's attention*. The group expressed concerns about the lack of effective collaboration between civil society organizations, a matter of internal coordination rather than external obstacles. Finally, the group emphasized the importance of non-institutionalized public participation, along with NGO participation, in the process of monitoring government bidding processes.

EPF will take in to account these recommendations and use the results of the Conference as a basis for designing future programs. We encourage other organizations to do the same.

The Conference was widely covered in the Armenian media. Coverage included a number of reflections on the remarks made by Ambassador Yovanovitch, which was spiced with examples of corruption-related issues from the United States, as well as remarks made by Amalia Kostanyan. Journalists also demonstrated interest in the concept of trilateral cooperation between the Media, Civil Society and the Government introduced by this program. The conference was highlighted by a number of major media outlets in Armenia, including Public TV of Armenia, H2 Channel, Panorama, A1+, Groong online, Hetq online, Arminfo and NT News Agencies.