

Youth Against Corruption: An National Essay Contest (Georgia)

Summary

The project Youth Versus Corruption consisted of a series of discussions culminating in a school essay contest for 14-15 year olds. Students were encouraged to develop and express their attitudes towards corruption and lawfulness, whilst raising their awareness on the issue through discussions with guest speakers and by writing creative essays. This empowering project captivated the interest of students by providing an opportunity for their opinions to be heard at national level, and by inviting famous people to attend discussions at schools.

The project was carried out by Transparency International Georgia between September 2003 and February 2004 in 19 schools in six regions of Georgia¹. TI-Georgia worked closely with the Georgian Ministry of Education's Culture of Lawfulness Project.²

Background

"During this period of injustice in the country ordinary citizens were hurt most. They longed for money to buy bread, and this is the reason why people started mass protests against the government. The government was unable to use force against its people. High officials had committed so many crimes that they could no longer redeem themselves. Each one of them was involved in corruption and everyone was aware of this fact. After the change of government all the corrupt people became very scared, some of them fled the country, others were arrested..."

Zaza Datukshvili (15)

Recent research leaves little doubt that the difficult economic and political situation in Georgia can be attributed largely to high levels of corruption. The attitude of citizens to corruption has also been problematic. Although the negative impact of corruption on a larger scale is widely accepted, its effect on everyday life often remains obscured. Where it is recognised, people are generally pessimistic about the prospects of fighting corruption successfully. Consequently, there is an urgent need for awareness-raising campaigns that draw attention to the everyday effects of corruption and the effective means to curb

1 The regions included Tbilisi, Senaki, Telavi, Tianeti, Batumi, Gori

2 Funded by the Open Society Georgia Foundation, OSGF, and the US Department of Justice

The project in numbers

- 19 schools and 589 students took part in this project;
- 758 questions were asked on the issues of corruption and legality at the meetings with guest-speakers;
- 411 essays were written during the contest.

corruption. This increased awareness is vital for Georgia's success and the mobilisation of young people is especially crucial in this regard.

A course entitled 'Culture of Legality', focusing on law and corruption issues, was introduced and piloted in 19 schools by the Ministry of Education in 2002. It was financed by the American National Strategic Information Center. The ministry dubbed the project a success and integrated the course into the curriculum of grade 9 (14-15 year olds) for the following academic year (2003-2004). The course became obligatory for all 147 Tbilisi (Georgia's capital city) schools as well as in those regional schools where the course was piloted. The ministry intends to bring this course to all Georgian schools over the next two years.

The project

In conjunction with this new course, TI-Georgia carried out a youth awareness-raising campaign, which included a series of discussions, culminating in an essay contest. The project sought to sensitise young people to issues of corruption and legitimacy and to lend greater impact to the anti-corruption programmes already carried out in schools. The essay component in particular gave students the opportunity to express their ideas and to use knowledge gained from the discussions. The contest also sent a signal that society was interested in youth voices. After a selection process, the nine best essays were published in Georgia's premiere newspaper, 24 Hours, and posted on TI-Georgia's website.

In introducing this campaign to Georgian schools, TI-Georgia worked closely with the Culture of Legality Programme, the Ministry of Education, the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, and the Anti-Corruption Council of Georgia. TI-Georgia, along with these organisations, offered special prizes for winners, using funds provided by the Soros Foundation. Additionally, prominent panelists in the discussion sessions distributed their books to the students for free.

The project also coincided with the pre-revolutionary demonstrations in Georgia, which influenced its implementation. The project commenced in Septem-



Carola Huebner-Kruzinna (13), Nicaragua

ber and October, just preceding the November 2003 elections followed by the Rose Revolution of 23rd November. People were very preoccupied with the upcoming elections, and, as a result, students and teachers were often absent from school.

Planning and organisation

The campaign, Youth Versus Corruption, took place over 6 months. The first month focused on preparation and logistics, during which a project booklet was published with a complete description of the project.

The project working group held a meeting with the participant schools' teachers and Ministry of Education representatives. The working group consisted of a TI coordinator, a professional linguist, a representative of Ministry of Education, a poet, a writer, a lawyer and a journalist. At the first meeting the group discussed the following topics:

- which issues and questions would best engage the students;
- the best guest speakers for 14-15 year olds; and
- how to structure the discussions and essay contest to the age and knowledge level of the students.

Four working meetings were held over two months to establish the form of the contest and a mechanism for evaluating essays. A list of potential guest speakers was established, the format for their discussions was developed, topics were selected for the essay contest, and project follow-up measures were determined.

Students were asked to select the guests they wanted to meet. Their selections included many media representatives. With its extensive network of connections TI-Georgia was able to arrange for these prominent personalities to come speak to the students. Teachers who had taught the Culture of Legality course were contracted as local coordinators for each school. They assisted in organising project events and participated in the preliminary grading of essays. Information booklets and posters were distributed to schools where the discussion sessions were arranged. The following topics for the essay contest were selected:

- Is injustice the source of corruption, or is corruption the source of injustice?
- Describe a corrupt person (appearance, life-style) and how they differ from other people;
- Imagine that you work in an organisation that condones corruption. What would you do?

Discussion forums

Discussion forums were held as a preparatory stage for the essay contest. For each discussion forum, one guest speaker was assigned to each school. In some cases this would be a poet, in other cases, a journalist or famous lawyer. The atmosphere at the events was charged with excitement. The students, especially those from the regions, were thrilled at the chance to meet well-known Georgians they knew from print or television. The parents of the students were also very eager to cooperate and gave useful feedback. The dialogue centred on the students' personal experiences with corruption, and what they had done to solve or work within the situation.

The discussion forums were structured to be interactive. At the beginning of the session, guests would speak about themselves, offer a topic for discussion or invite students to ask questions. TI-Georgia recorded all questions, and used these results to devise essay topics that would be of real interest for the students.

Students in the regions were more active during the discussions than their counterparts in the big cities and later also took a more independent position in their essays. The urban youth was less optimistic but better informed. In particular, students from schools in the capital were not as active in discus-

sions and were often quite cynical in response to the issues raised. In the more isolated regions, these discussion sessions with famous guest speakers became important events. Although conceptualised as a preparatory stage in the essay contest, it became apparent that the discussion forums were no less important than the contest itself.

Student essays were solicited from those schools that participated in the forums. The forums took place during the first few months of the project and the essay contest in the last few months. In sum, there

were 19 meetings at 19 separate schools. Each meeting featured one guest speaker and 30-35 students, meaning that, overall, around 600 students participated.

Essay contest

As Georgian school curriculum does not offer specific courses on essay writing, TI-Georgia coordinated a workshop on writing instruction in all participant schools prior to the contest event. The contest then took place on 15th and 16th December 2003. The students were given the three topics outlined above to choose from and two hours to write their essays. They were encouraged to use various written styles to express their opinions on corruption.

The evaluation of the essays was conducted in two stages. In order to ensure impartiality, the essays were first evaluated by teachers from other participat-



ing schools. The top ten per cent of essays were selected during this initial evaluation and sent to an independent jury established by TI-Georgia. The jury was composed of a writer, an education official, lawyers, a linguist, and a TI representative. The essays were evaluated on a ten-point system based on four criteria: analytical skill, creativity, personal expression and command of the Georgian language.

Of the over 500 submissions, three winners and eight runners-up were announced. The winning essays, as previously mentioned, were published in the newspaper 24 Hours and on the TI-Georgia website. An awards ceremony was held on 24th December 2003 at the Open Society Foundation Georgia conference hall. TI-Georgia awarded the winners special certificates and prizes. All teachers, jury members, nominated students, partner organisation representatives, guest speakers and donors were invited to the event.

Results

"How would corruption be created if there was no injustice? In a just state everything and everyone must serve justice, but does not corruption create injustice? I believe that it is no news for anyone that the truth in Georgia does not have a very big value. Many people ignore the truth and act in an illegal and unjust way."

Tamar Mebonia (15)

An evaluation questionnaire was designed to identify changes in students' views on corruption before and after the programme, and they were disseminated after the contest. The questionnaires also solicited student opinions on which features the programme might add or change, and the students generated a list of potential guest speakers for the next implementation of the project.

Empowering students

The most important achievements of the campaign were the large number of participants involved and the apparent change in students' attitudes. Youths that participated in the project learned that their opinions and ideas were valuable and relevant to society. In particular, the interviews revealed that students do have strong views on corruption, but feel that no one is interested in their opinions on the subject. The project was valuable to them as it gave them the opportunity to express their views, which were taken seriously. Furthermore, teachers realised the benefits of discussing the subject of corruption with their students, and of adding such a discussion to the curriculum.

Challenges

“First of all, civil education must become part of the school curriculum, so that the new generation has a different ideology, so that she does not look at injustice as if it were none of her business and so that she takes action in the fight against injustice. She can do this by not offering bribes to the teacher; this will go a long way towards eradicating corruption and injustice.”

Tamuna Papavadze (15)

Although the project was an overall success, TI-Georgia encountered a number of difficulties along its way. For example, the Ministry of Education attempted to control the process and wanted to interfere with the selection of guest speakers and discussion topics. TI-Georgia dealt successfully with this problem by seeking support from other NGOs and putting pressure on the ministry as a collective force. The ministry asked TI not to bring revolutionary activists into schools as guest speakers, at one point going so far as to ask that the project be called off. In addition, they requested that they be informed of the essay topics before staging the contest. Fortunately, TI-Georgia did not make any concessions in these cases, as it had the support of most school officials. The change in administration after the revolution allowed it to continue the second phase of our project without interference.

Winning the interest of young people for this project was a central challenge. To this end, TI-Georgia used a few key incentives, including contests and awards, the chance to have an essay published and reach the greater public, and the opportunity to meet major Georgian celebrities. Competitions are not typical in Georgian schools, and the prospect of a contest with awards and public exposure was exciting and motivating for the students.

The most difficult and time-consuming part of the project was negotiating with guest speakers and organising their visits. As mentioned before, the project coincided with Georgia’s Rose Revolution. This caused a great deal of scheduling difficulty, as most of the planned speakers were active participants in the revolution. In the end, though, TI Georgia successfully held 19 discussions with students in six Georgian regions.

Recommendations

Most of the participants said that the contest was interesting for them as a way of sharing their opinions, but some still doubted that their ideas would be taken seriously by adults. Therefore, it would be good to expand the distribution of the winning essays, not just to newspapers and websites, but to television stations, radio and other schools. The essays could also be publicly

presented to high-level officials who would then respond directly to the students.

There are plans for follow-up projects, specifically to expand the programme to other schools and to first-year university students.

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The best essays can be read on the website of Transparency International Georgia in English and Georgian language.

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