

AFIF (TAJIKISTAN)

Launched in 2011, and funded by the Government of the Netherlands, Bridging the Gaps is a programme for key populations. It focuses on securing the health and human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, including men who have sex with men; people who use drugs; sex workers of all genders and people living with HIV. The programme is implemented in 15 countries by nine Alliance partners: Aidsfonds; *AFEW International*; COC Netherlands; MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health and Rights; Global Network of People Living with HIV; the Global Network of Sex Work Projects; International Network of People Who Use Drugs; International Treatment Preparedness Coalition; and Mainline. Tajikistan is one of the focus countries for the programme. Between 2011 and 2019, Bridging the Gaps has supported AFIF, (formerly *AFEW Tajikistan*), a social service organisation based in Dushanbe operating a public health programme for vulnerable populations, including people who use drugs.

The Bridging the Gaps programme aims to contribute to ending the AIDS epidemic among key populations by 2030 through the achievement of three long-term goals. The first is a strengthened civil society





that holds governments to account. The second is the increased fulfilment of key populations' human rights. The third is improved SRHR and fewer HIV transmissions. Civil society is at the heart of improving the health and rights of key populations, so strengthening civil society is a cornerstone of the programme. Starting in 2017, the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD), based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa, partnered with Aidsfonds to conduct research on capacity development within the Bridging the Gaps programme. The research, which took place from 2018-2019, aimed to identify the capacity development interventions which increase the effectiveness and impact of the work of civil society organisations and networks to achieve the Bridging the Gaps goals.

Part of the research design involved the preparation of case studies for four Bridging the Gaps partners. AFIF was one of the partners selected for the development of a case study. This is partly because of its significant achievements in Tajikistan on behalf of people who use drugs. It also relates to the pro-

gramme's long-term goals. The researchers used a participatory approach called outcome harvesting to collect data for the case studies.

This outcome harvesting engaged AFIF's staff, beneficiaries and strategic partners to identify the organisation's most significant results or achievements over the period of programme support. They were also asked about how capacity development support had helped. These results were confirmed through document reviews and key informant interviews with AFIF staff and individuals outside the organisation in Khujand, Panjakent, Bokhtar, Dushanbe, and Khorog. Research findings were presented and validated at a workshop held on 25 June 2019 in which AFIF staff, project sub grantees and stakeholders participated. Five key results emerged from the outcomes harvesting process as AFIF's most significant achievements during its participation in the Bridging the Gaps programme¹. In each of the outcomes, AFIF unleashed the potential of a range of actors to jointly realise development results. These outcomes were:

Outcomes

- The creation of key population advisory councils. The councils advise on AFIF's programmes and services, collect complaints and provide recommendations for improvement and resolution;
- The establishment of a voluntary counselling and testing centre for HIV. The provision of technical support to other non-governmental organisations in establishing such centres elsewhere in the country was also celebrated;
- The initiation of a Provincial coordination mechanism in support of comprehensive service provision to key populations in the Khatlon region;
- AFIF's assistance to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the compilation of guidelines for law enforcement staff in dealing with key populations; and,
- Undertaking joint monitoring visits to key population services with public health experts and members of key population groups.

The research observed how AFIF had seized the opportunity to take various innovative approaches in serving and working with key population groups to other non-governmental organisations during the programme implementation. At the same time, AFIF closely engaged with State institutions to generate their support and interest for these innovations. Individuals were empowered to build communities and networks. This important building block was used to further instil the principle of meaningful involvement within AFIF's own staff and in its network of partners. The individuals who became involved in the key population advisory councils said they had been personally, positively changed by the skills and experiences they got. These ranged from additional technical knowledge about the nature of organisations and service provision to more personal achievements such as improved skills and confidence for social interaction. They were given a chance to grow into their roles as representatives of communities of fully-valued individuals who were entitled to accountable and responsive programmes. This practice of involving key population members in meaningful and visible roles resulted in, among other outcomes, concrete action from Republican AIDS Centres: the centres taught staff not to be judgemental of members of key populations.

The development of capacity and use of people's potential was found to be a central feature in how AFIF implemented the programme. For example, AFIF worked with outside experts in its programmes. It also set up online consultations with these experts that were open to key populations. The organisation also set up a Q&A page on its website.

Particularly exemplary is the organisation's approach to mastering innovative practices first before transferring them to others. This has earned it a reputation across the country as a pioneer and learning organisation that genuinely conceives its programmes on beneficiary needs. To illustrate, AFIF was the first non-governmental organisation in the country that granted government permission to open a voluntary counselling and testing centre. This centre provides an alternative for, particularly, the key population groups who are known to be reluctant to test at Republican AIDS centres. Based on AFIF's own experience, it then trained other non-governmental organisations who also successfully registered as service providers. This increased the coverage of HIV testing and counselling services among hard-to-reach populations, including people who use drugs, in Tajikistan. The organisations all received substantial capacity support from AFIF. They also established their own key population advisory councils.

AFIF formed strategic alliances with other key players in the fields of public health, harm reduction and migration. It led the establishment of different regional networks; the largest can be found in Khatlon region, uniting 29 State-level and 17 civil society and community level organisations in providing comprehensive services for key populations. Members of the network indicated that it led to a greater recognition of each other's roles. It was also a more effective use of existing referral chains and resources within the region. The research observed that, in order for this network to remain effective, AFIF must continue to maintain the lead. The management of the dynamics in such networks is not without chal-

¹ The five outcomes can also be found on the website as individual descriptions, providing more in-depth information on the particular approach taken by AFEW Tajikistan and the context in which they were developed and implemented.

lenges. It requires specific skills, such as conflict resolution and risk management, to function effectively in new organisational structures. The research came across similar experiences in the other case studies. It found that the capacity development support offered to Bridging the Gaps partners, such as AFIF, did not fully address these capacity needs.

It was clear that AFIF was able to influence the legal position of people who use drugs. This could be seen through the direct collaborations between AFIF and the law enforcement authorities and with the prison system. This difficult work demands more than just public health expertise. The inside perspective of AFIF's director, who has been in law enforcement for most of his career, has been critical for navigating this landscape and creating working partnerships. The attention for detail and procedure by AFIF's staff in all of their work also emerged from interviews with government officials as an important enabler of trust. There were also indications that AFIF had been able to get the ministry to commit to addressing discrimination and acts of violence within the force against people who use drugs. The concrete effects of the new guidelines, which AFIF helped to develop and update, still needed to be evaluated. But the Ministry has taken responsibili-

ty for sharing the guidelines and raising awareness among its employees. The guidelines are meant to help prevent exposure to HIV and other infectious diseases by law enforcement officers while on duty. They're also meant to improve their attitudes towards people who use drugs and being more attentive to the (health) care needs of this vulnerable group.

To conclude, the central place of capacity development within AFIF's development programmes sets the organisation apart from other non-governmental organisations in the country. It also grants AFIF the possibility to lead innovations and influence mainstream practice in Tajikistan. It became evident through the research that AFIF seized this role, using the strength of connection between the various new approaches to get stakeholders interested and involved. From our interactions with AFIF's stakeholders, it was clear that AFIF was expected to continue to fulfil this role and be at the table in discussions about new National policies and strategies. However, the reliance on external funding, as with many other non-governmental organisations in Tajikistan, does make the organisation vulnerable to instabilities which might challenge the upkeep of its influential role.

