

Perceptions of human rights by Armenian citizens

During the interviews of local citizens in Vanadzor, Gyumri and Yerevan, the participants of the study visit gathered information concerning the understanding and perceptions of human rights by locals. This provides an insight into the mind-sets of Armenian people concerning human rights but can in no case be considered representative.

According to the citizens interviewed, what are human rights?

According to the feedback of the participants, it seems that the locals interviewed were largely unaware of human rights. Furthermore almost none of the interviewed locals could mention non-governmental organisations working on the protection of human rights in Armenia. Participants reported that some of the interviewed locals would fear to be recorded during the interviews or would refuse to answer once understanding it is about human rights issues. Some others mentioned that it is hard to have a non-mainstream opinion in Armenia as there is a lack of tolerance for different opinions or views.

Many locals mentioned human rights in relation to the local demographic situation: emigration is currently one of the main issues in Armenia e.g. in one year, Vanadzor city accounted an official loss of 20% of their population.

Which human rights violations or issues are locals aware about?

Many interviewees noted that human rights are regularly violated in their country, but could not name any specific examples. Some citizens mentioned their lack of awareness of human rights violations as they are not involved in politics. Only one person interviewed was able to give a personal example of facing human rights violations – all other people interviewed talked about “others’ stories”.

Some interviewees mentioned that critical activists or artists are generally not very popular in the country whereas some others criticized their co-citizens for pretending that there are no issues in Armenia due to the habit of not criticizing anything during Soviet times.

In overall, many issues related to human rights were mentioned by locals: corruption, unfair elections, lack of access to social rights, employment, right to a decent life, minority rights, labour rights, personal privacy, weak law enforcement, property rights, women rights, religious freedom, lack of equal opportunities, freedom of thought, expression and speech, freedom of movement, freedom of protest and assembly, violence against human rights activists, free media, manipulation of citizens for electoral purposes, sexual minorities rights and transparency.

What were the general interest of local communities in human rights issues?

Most of the locals were open to talk with the participants. When they would understand it is about human rights, some of them would then refuse to continue the discussion. Some of the local residents mentioned that the situation has improved radically since the independence, whereas some others disagreed with this statement. According to the participants, criticising openly the country or political situation seemed to be difficult for most of the interviewed locals. However, they would add immediately after their critical statements that they do love and respect their nation very much.

Generally locals felt more confident speaking about human rights violations in Armenia if the group of participants would mention human rights violations in their own country, too. From the impression of the participants, women seem to be generally more satisfied than men concerning the human rights situation in Armenia: men tend to criticise or complain much more about the economic and political situation in the country.

A cooperation in international youth work

The European Intercultural Forum e. V. and Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor Office cooperate in the field of peace education since 2012. The first common project was a 15-months capacity-building project named “Build Peace on your own - Civil Society for a United Caucasus” supporting youth activists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Germany, The Netherlands and Spain to develop cross-cultural youth initiatives fostering peace in the Caucasus.

European Intercultural Forum e. V.

Osloer Str. 13, 13559 Berlin, GERMANY
eif.germany@googlemail.com
www.european-intercultural-forum.org



Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor Office

Tigran Mets 59, Vanadzor, ARMENIA
hcav@hcav.am
http://hcav.am/



Thanks. We would like to warmly thank the participants for their active participation and enthusiasm during the Study Visit in Armenia, as well as the civil society organisations from all across Europe which selected and prepared them for the event. A special thanks goes to the organisations and inhabitants of Vanadzor, Gyumri and Yerevan which hosted the group and answered participants' questions during the visits and interviews. Furthermore we thank Maksymilian Frasz for proof-reading the brochure.



This project has been funded with the support of the Youth in Action Programme (German National Agency) of the European Commission.

Discover the Caucasus Human Rights in Armenia

Study Visit
October 7-13, 2013

This brochure summarises the outcomes of the Study Visit “Discover the Caucasus - Human Rights in Armenia” that took place in Armenia on October 7-15, 2013. The Study Visit was organised by the European Intercultural Forum e. V. (Germany) in cooperation with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor (Armenia) and was funded by the Youth in Action Programme of the European Commission.



Study Visit

Discover the Caucasus

The study visit in Armenia was the third in a series of study visits in the Caucasus dedicated to discovering the current social and economic situation of young people living in this part of the world. Having looked at the situation of the voluntary sector in Georgia during a study visit in 2011 and the challenges for young people in the Ganja region of Azerbaijan in 2012, the third edition of "Discover the Caucasus" focused on the human rights situation in Armenia.

The study visit featured meetings with a wide range of local non-governmental organisations or citizens' groups in Vanadzor, Gyumri and Yerevan. The meetings addressed different aspects of human rights such as participation, gender equality, rights of sexual minorities, equal opportunities for youth, legal protection and peace-building. Additionally, the participants conducted interviews with local citizens in each city to engage into a dialogue on their perception of the meaning and importance of human rights.

The study visit responded to the following objectives:

- To get an insight into the human rights situation and the civil society sector defending human rights in Armenia
- To discover young peoples' perception of human rights in Armenia and more generally in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus
- To create new partnerships enhancing local capacities for human rights protection in Armenia and in Eastern

Europe and the Caucasus

As a result of the study visit, this brochure gives an overview of the various human rights issues Armenia is facing, as identified by the participants during the event in October 2013. The brochure also presents the perceptions of local citizens concerning Human Rights in general and specific issues.

This publication cannot be considered a scientific survey of the human rights in Armenia, but it aims to give a general overview of the local reality in Armenia.

Human Rights issues in Armenia

During the visits to non-governmental organisations and the interviews with local citizens in Vanadzor, Gyumri and Yerevan, the participants of the study visit listed the following main human rights challenges. This list cannot be taken as exhaustive as it is the result of a seven-day exploration programme of human rights issues in Armenia.

*** Lack of awareness of human rights:** representatives of the non-governmental organisations visited during the study visit mentioned the lack of understanding and awareness of what Human Rights are as the most striking challenge. Human Rights Education is provided only by non-governmental organisations in the non-formal educational sector and it rarely occurs in formal education.

*** Role of civil society:** according to the NGOs representatives questioned, citizens of Armenia have limited trust in civil society. The role of the civil society was referred to as widely misunderstood. One of the reasons for this is that some NGOs are misused by authorities or are run by governmental representatives in order to serve their own interests.

*** Participation and citizenship:** participation in social and political processes was mentioned as a challenge for the Armenian society during many discussions with local non-governmental organisations. Local inhabitants seem not to be used to participate actively in the life of their community. Likewise, participatory democracy seems to be a concept that the large parts of the population are not familiar with.

*** Equal opportunities for all:** several civil society organisations visited during the study visit mentioned unequal opportunities for citizens. Discriminations in the access of study place or job positions were mentioned as common, especially linked with criteria's such as economic background, ethnical background, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

*** Women's rights and gender equality:** women rights activists reported several challenges in the field of women's rights and gender equality such as unequal access to the labour market, lack of personal privacy for women, early marriages, domestic violence and selective abortion.

*** Tolerance and respect of cultural diversity:** according to many civil society activists met during the study visit, citizens in Armenia have a very limited understanding of cultural diversity. Tolerance towards

differences especially in regards to ethnic background, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation or life-style is not wide-spread.

*** Democracy and corruption:** the country's political system was not referred to as democratic during discussions with human rights activists. Rigged and falsified elections were mentioned several times as a recurrent issue in Armenia since its independence. Corruption of the authorities and elected politicians was mentioned by human rights activists in various contexts.

*** Rights of sexual minorities:** civil society activists mentioned recurrent structural discrimination as well as physical and psychological violence against sexual minorities in Armenia. Civil society activists protecting rights of LGBT groups are subject to regular threats. In some cases, representatives of organisations defending sexual minorities had to leave the country in order to be safe.

*** Freedom of expression and media:** representatives of civil society organisations visited mentioned that independent media are rather weak in Armenia. Pressure and threats against journalists are recurrent. Expressing non-mainstream opinions can often result in facing challenges within own social group or even social exclusion. Journalists are often attacked or subjected to violence by the police during demonstrations or peaceful meetings.

*** Social cohesion and dialogue:** structural dialogue between civil society and authorities; among civil society organisations; or among various sub-groups of citizens remains unfortunately rare.

