*October 15, 2015*

**Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan**

**Human Rights Program: Portfolio Review**

**Focus/Project: “A.Alexandrova’s special grants competition”**

Aizhan Oshakbayeva, coordinator of the Human Rights Program, presented the project “A.Alexandrova’s Special Grants Competition”. The Board of Trustees established this special grant to memorize of Anna Alexandrova’s contribution in ensuring human rights of most vulnerable and marginalized groups. Anna Alexandrova was a Chair of the Board of Soros Foundation Kazakhstan in 2008-2011, she was a lawyer who dedicated her life to the promotion of social justice and human rights. Under her leadership, social justice and tolerance took a special place among the priorities of the SFK.

Launched in April of 2012, this project aims to support civic initiatives in the field of protection of the rights of socially vulnerable groups including but not limited to injecting drug users, sexual minorities, juveniles, people with no fixed accommodation, as well as those who released from prison. The idea of the special grant was to draw attention of general population and media to the problems of abovementioned groups in the context of total stigma and discrimination. To address these issues the Board decided to issue 2 grants on the annual basis with the overall budget of 10,000 $. The main idea was to support one research and one advocacy project value based and targeted to attract attention to the needs of respective marginalized group(s).

The contest has been announced 4 times already starting from 2012. During this period SFK has received 43 applications in total from 10 cities of Kazakhstan.

2012: 13 applications from 7 cities; 2 projects implemented

2013: 10 applications from 7 cities; 1 project implemented

2014-2015: 20 applications from 10 cities; 2 projects implemented

The discussion centered on the following:

**What is required for an effective implementation of projects? How to widen the quantity of regions -applicants participated in the contest and how to widen the coverage of the vulnerable groups? What are the main advantages of this annual contest?**

* The quality of applications is still weak.
* Projects are mostly of research than informational character (last two years).
* It is necessary to build the capacity of organizations/individuals in project management.
* Western and Eastern Kazakhstan are still passive.

**Questions and summary of responses:**

* What are the expectations of this contest?

*The main idea of the contest is raising awareness about the degree of stigma and discrimination against marginalized groups and to demonstrate effective ways of protection of their human rights;*

* Poor regional coverage of the contest: why during the 4 years the number of cities is not increasing?

*Civil Society Partners from Western and Eastern Kazakhstan traditionally are not active in the field of human rights. It is an issue for all grant-makers addressing human rights problems at local level. Partially this could be solved by conducting capacity building projects of local human rights activists. With this respect SFK Human Rights Program has prioritized and working for 2 years already on building capacity of human rights defenders with the strong emphasis on participants from the regions of Kazakhstan.*

* How to involve Kazakh-speaking auditory to participate in the contest and to actively contribute to the discussions around marginalized issues?

*It is necessary to improve and diversify the channels of dissemination of information about the grant competition; activate social network and perhaps create a blog or a page like «Humans of New York» Facebook page.*

* How to increase the publicity and effectiveness of the contest taking into account limitations related to the number of partners who has a good capacity to carry out quality research and advocacy projects?

*One of the suggestions is to re-conceptualize the contest and issue an award for activists (human rights defenders, bloggers, artists, civic journalists, etc.) who contribute to the improvement of lives of vulnerable groups by taking serious actions to protect their rights or by making their problems visible in media. The prize could be shaped as a travel grant aimed at further capacity and network-building of a grantee at international level.*

*Recommendations:*

* To actively promote the contest via different media channels including social networks, blogs;
* To share information about the contest through Kazakh-language information channels to attract activists from regions of Kazakhstan;
* To re-conceptualize the contest and reward the extraordinary approaches in raising awareness and addressing the problems of marginalized groups;
* Organize a discussion of new concept of the contest with the Board members in early 2016.