

FINAL EVALUATION



# EVALUATION OVERVIEW

## GEORGIA SYRINGE VENDING MACHINE TRIAL (GSVMT)

Evaluator: Technical Assistance for Management (TeAM)  
Evaluation date: october 2021 - february 2022

### Key project data

- **Country:** Georgia
- **Budget:** €423,620.06
- **Lead organization:** Addiction Research Center – Alternative Georgia (ALTGEO)
- **Start date:** 01/04/2018  
**End date:** 30/06/2021
- **Partners:** Georgian Harm Reduction network, Georgian Network of People Who Use Drugs et National Center for Disease Control and Public Health

### Background

There are around 50,000 people who inject drugs in Georgia, ranking it third in the world, which has significant consequences, including high rates of hepatitis C (HCV). Needle exchange programs (NEPs) have proven effective in reducing the risk of HIV and HCV transmission among people who inject drugs, but coverage in Georgia is far from the level needed to impact on these pandemics. Currently, NEPs in Georgia are fully funded by the Global Fund, through the Georgian Harm Reduction Network (GHRN). GHRN data suggests that approximately 25,000 people received needles and syringes at least once in 2015. However, only 9% of program beneficiaries were women, and only 5% were young people between aged 18-24.

### Project leads and implementation approach

The project is led by AltGeo in partnership with the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) and the GHRN. It sets out to conduct an operational trial to implement automatic syringe dispensers in Georgia. The dispensers are used by injecting drug users who have an access card.

### Project objectives

#### Overall objective

To increase access to sterile injecting equipment for people living with HIV and AIDS by establishing syringe vending machines in Georgia.



#### Specific objective 1

Identify the prerequisites to implement syringe dispensers through establishing a community advisory council, assessing needs and barriers, and adapting dispensers to meet the needs of stakeholders.

#### Specific objective 2

Carry out a staged pilot to measure the effectiveness and ownership of these dispensers by users.

#### Specific objective 3

Document the implementation process, assess barriers and facilitating factors and measure the cost of implementation and sustainability.

#### Specific objective 4

Develop and submit to the government a proposal related to ownership and implementation of syringe dispensers in Georgia.

## Evaluation results



### Relevance

Due to the significant involvement of Alternative Georgia and the relationships established with the various partners, the overall relevance of this project is good and shows a very detailed understanding of the context of drug use and the harm reduction sector. Previous studies conducted by AltGeo had provided key evidence of the need for an intervention of this kind, which addresses the issue of hard-to-reach drug users. Finally, the intervention was feasible, despite a hostile legal context and a high transactional cost relating to installing the machines.

### Effectiveness

Overall, specific objectives 1 and 2 were fully achieved, while 3 and 4 were only partially achieved. Effectiveness was mainly affected by the lack of solutions to distribute usage cards to injecting drug users (affecting the achievement of the expected level of demand) and disruptions due to COVID-19. AltGeo worked with five community organizations who work with injecting drug users to raise awareness and distribute the cards, which enabled strong ownership of the service. However, these organizations have not actively promoted the machines, due to a lack of support and a lack of oversight of the interventions. The inclusion of new recruits, particularly young adults and women, was also impacted by this lack of involvement of partner organizations.

### Efficiency

The total budget has not been fully disbursed; a small portion has been reinvested into new products (female condoms, pregnancy tests). The cost in terms of time seems to have quite significant: it took 30 months of the 39-month project to install the dispensers and make the 10 machines fully operational. The total cost of the project for each of the ten machines was €20,436, with a cost of €1,963/month/machine. The total cost of the project per user was €66/user/year, indicating good value for money (a study showed that the unit cost per client per year to access the needle exchange program was €191). However, the dispensers are not intended to replace the use of existing needle exchange programs, but rather complement them, meaning that this €66 needs to be added to the needle exchange program operating costs.

### Impact

Overall, the impact is difficult to measure. The dispensers were implemented gradually and were only fully functional for nine months. However, two major factors reduced the potential impact of the program: repeated stock-outs and dispenser outages. However, there seems to have been a positive impact in terms of night-time drug users (more than 50% of transactions through the dispensers). Yet, in terms of patient coverage, there has been low impact (8% of drug users registered by partner community-based organizations).

### Sustainability

Testimonials from injecting drug users confirm that they are satisfied with the products distributed by the machines. The Global Fund has agreed to cover the dispensers and has agreed in principle to fund this activity from the next NFM. In addition, the dispensers have also been included in the strategic plan for HIV. At regional level, dispensers have been introduced into the regional C19RM grant (Russia, Macedonia and Moldova). The Global Fund is interested in consolidating the data and identifying lessons learned around this intervention.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of automatic syringe dispensers in the harm reduction program was **relevant and effective**, accounting for 14% of all syringes dispensed by the program. Thanks to the dispensers, **new users have had free access to these products**. However, the hostile environment hindered the impact of the project (lack of large-scale public advertisements) and hindered the public recruitment of clients. In terms of participation, beneficiaries were able to play a more active role in promoting the program (distributing cards to use the dispenser) and they were able to share their satisfaction levels and raise complaints.

In order to increase the level of use of these dispensers, AltGeo could **relocate** them based on users' recommendations, **strengthen** the distribution of additional cards through new communication channels, and **adapt** messages to the public and to the hostile legal environment. Signing **partnership** agreements with local CBOs (Mandala and Tanadgoma), **mapping** of active youth organizations and improving the **attractiveness** of health services for women would make it possible to improve targeting of under-25s and women and girls.

L'Initiative could establish linkages between AltGeo and AFEW to **promote peer-to-peer exchanges** and lessons learned on working with adolescents who use drugs. In the same way the Global Fund could **strengthen experience sharing** of other countries and promote sharing good practice in the region.



**L'INITIATIVE**  
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