

ACCEPT, Romania

"Learning and Empowerment: Key Issues in Strategies for HIV/AIDS Prevention" (Chiangmai, 1 - 5 March, 2004)

Introduction and context:

A. Background on Epidemiological Data:

It is likely that there is serious under-reporting of AIDS cases in Romania. There have not been any sero-prevalence surveys conducted in Romania and the completeness of the reporting is questionable. This makes meaningful comparisons with neighboring countries very difficult. UNAIDS and other HIV/AIDS experts have estimated that up to 20,000 Romanians are infected with HIV.

There is very little information on the incidence of MSM. Given that homosexuality was illegal in Romania till very recently, it is assumed that the proportion of sexually transmitted cases among MSMs is seriously under-reported. This law, article 200 from the Penal Code was amended at the end of 2001. Many MSMs were fearful to disclose to a medical provider their sexual activities and therefore were not tested for HIV and many STIs have gone untreated due to this discrimination.

B. Background on MSM Population

Historically, Romanian MSM have been deprived access to safer sex information and health care services. This is in part a result of same-sex relationships being illegal under article 200 of the Penal Code which was changed in 2001. Yet, MSMs remain one of the most vulnerable groups in Romania by legal discrimination and social oppression¹. Homosexuals and MSMs in Romanian society are subject to stigma and discrimination both by public officials and the general population. Due to this social exclusion, MSMs are forced into living double lives, one as gay, bisexual, or transgender in private life and one as an heterosexual in their social and public life. Non-governmental organizations and health care providers are hesitant to develop and distribute gay-specific AIDS prevention materials, to conduct related activities, or to provide related reproductive health services. This intolerant climate puts MSM at high risk for HIV and other STIs.

Based on ACCEPT's experiences with the health profession and studies implemented in Bucharest like "General considerations regarding the aspirations and the needs of MSM group of ACCEPT", , and "Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation in Romania – a Survey", outlined the following issues of MSMs:

¹ The "Public Opinion Barometer" commissioned by the Open Society Foundation Romania in Nov. 2000 revealed 86% of Romania's population would not tolerate a homosexual resident in their neighborhood.

- ⌘ The mental and emotional status, self-acceptance and personal development of MSM becomes at least unbalanced, if not resulting in the internalization of the negative feelings which, in the end, lead to self-hatred, depression, exclusion from society's public life or, sometimes, even suicide
- ⌘ When accessing specialized services (health care, psychological counseling, social services) as well as in employment or any other service in the public and social life, if MSM do not face homophobia or trans-phobia, specialist do not have the (1) knowledge (2) skills and (3) experience to appropriately address the needs of MSM, the quality of the service received most of the times being very low
- ⌘ MSM also fear about being treated as ill persons and stigmatized, worry about the confidentiality of the professional act and the lack of codes of conduct to guarantee non-discrimination
- ⌘ If not disclosing their sexual orientation or (trans)gender identity to a specialist of such service, the assumption will be that clients or beneficiaries are heterosexuals, the quality of the service being low and the professional act inappropriate, when not taking into account particularities related to sexual orientation and (trans)gender identity.
- ⌘ One study revealed that 69% of subjects never discussed their sexual behavior with a physician, even in the conditions that 47% of them had an STI history.
- ⌘ ACCEPT is the only institution in Romania who, so far, developed psychological, medical, and social services, as well as HIV and STI's prevention activities for MSM
- ⌘ Giving up school or job because of discrimination based on sexual orientation or (trans)gender identity
- ⌘ Long term unemployment because of the discrimination based on sexual orientation or (trans)gender identity
- ⌘ Public policies and their drafting and implementing agents (ministries, local authorities, NGOs and professional associations) NEVER included MSM among their target groups

The mission/goal of ACCEPT

Who is ACCEPT? ACCEPT is a human rights organisation registered in 1996 having as a mission to create a better society for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual people) by developing services that meet certain specific needs of the sexual minorities in Romania..

In the staff of ACCEPT, there are 3 men and 8 women, age varying from 20 to 31. 6 of them are working in HIV/AIDS prevention targeting MSM and male CSW.

In the board of ACCEPT there are three women and two men, age varying from 23 to 51.

Reasons for the selection of ACCET association as the main actor to cover prevention projects targeting MSM in Romania:

- **Unique profile of ACCEPT in Romania.**

ACCEPT's mission is to create a better Romania for its LGBT citizens.

- **Confidence of the target group (LGBT) in ACCEPT as an institution working for LGBT.**

ACCEPT is the national organization in Romania in which LGBT have confidence and to which they turn to for accessing or identifying services responding to their needs - given the **major obstacle in approaching directly these beneficiaries: their invisibility and dispersion, as well as low representation in the social life.**

- **Vulnerability of LGBT in Romania**

LGBT are one of the most vulnerable groups in Romania because of discrimination by law (article 200 of the Penal Code) and social oppression during all our history

- **Political context. It is the right time!**

Given the repeal of article 200 of the Penal code (1) and (2) the adoption by Parliament of an anti-discrimination law (Government Ordinance 137/2000 and (3) the awareness at EU level (Commission and Parliament) on sexual orientation discrimination in Romania, and the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (OJ [2000] L 303/16), **it is the right time to initiate an influence on the public policies in Romania to be inclusive for LGBT and to combat their (social) exclusion.** The reality is that the adoption of laws does not automatically improve the legal and social status of the target group, therefore the revision of public policies is the next step on the way towards the (social) inclusion of LGBT in Romania.

- **ACCEPT expertise**

Activities build upon ACCEPT's few years experience in developing research and services for LGBT in the project proposed (social and health) areas. Through this project ACCEPT will expand its services and multiply them through other institutions and organizations.

- **ACCEPT political credibility**
Thanks to the successful lobbying with EU institutions and Romanian authorities in the last 8 years, ACCEPT attained the political credibility before Romanian public institutions and NGOs as a credible partner in projects targeting LGBT in Romania.

(a) **relevance of the project to the target group**

- The project will **provide a complex of (social and health) services to LGBT**, according to their needs and based on the ACCEPT experience of working with this target group
- Apart from **solving problems of individual clients**, ACCEPT will **influence the public policies** in the relevant (social and health) areas, fostering the inclusion of LGBT as a targeted group of existing policies and services of other public institutions, professional associations and NGOs
- The project will increase the Romanian LGBT solidarity through contractual, consultative and collaborative project participation promoted by ACCEPT for the support of the local LGBT groups outside of Bucharest

Funder: Global Fund. Other potential donors: EU Delegation, The Cooperative Dutch Foundations

Project summary:

The main objective of this project is to decrease the incidence of STI/HIV/AIDS by increasing risk assessment skills, partner reduction, and safer sexual behavior among MSMs. This project aims to reach over 50,000 MSM with behavior change messages and activities.

ACCEPT has conducted limited qualitative research among gay and bisexual men on safer sex knowledge, attitudes, and practices. The MSM who participated in these initial focus groups did not consistently use condoms. Few had ever used water-based lubricant. In general, they had negative attitudes about condoms, safer sex, and any other perceived limitations on their sexual activity. Due to the stigmatization of MSM in the private and public health systems, MSMs rarely get treatment for STIs and thus add to the vicious cycle of the STI and HIV epidemic.

Target groups : MSM. For this project we include male commercial sex workers (CSWs) in our definition of MSMs. Therefore, outreach activities and materials will also be designed to target male CSWs in high-risk zones. Formative research with MSMs will be used to determine real barriers, social issues and effective means to convince MSMs

on consistent condom use and how to increase access to social and health services. Materials and models will be developed from the information provided in the formative research and then be implemented in behavior change communication and outreach activities.

Concept of empowerment applied in prevention work

For this project, targeting MSMs, ACCEPT with the support of PSI will build on the lessons learned in social marketing to youth and PSI's extensive experience targeting MSMs in Central America. The project aims to not only increase condom use and partner reduction but also increase use of STI/HIV/AIDS testing and treatment facilities by MSMs. This project will empower MSM beneficiaries by providing them information and training to make safe and healthy choices.

Specific objectives:

A. Project Goal

The goal of this project is to decrease the incidence of STI/HIV/AIDS among MSMs.

B. Project Objectives

- 1) Increase risk reduction among MSMs to prevent STI/HIV/AIDS.
- 2) Increase in the number of Romanian NGOs and public institutions that include services targeting MSMs.
- 3) Increase in the number of health professionals who provide adequate and non-discriminatory health services to MSMs.

C. Project Outputs

Increased self risk assessment and knowledge about the benefits of consistent condom use

Increased self reported partner reduction among MSMs.

Increased access to health and social services in priority high-risk zones.

Increased access to condoms and lubricants in priority high-risk zones.

1. Activities

Targeting MSM Strategy

In this project, ACCEPT and PSI Romania will implement an integrated approach and provide MSMs with appropriate educational programs and materials needed to make healthy decisions regarding sexual practices. It will improve access to accurate and confidential health information through the establishment of an information and referral help line.

PSI Romania will be responsible to increase the accessibility, affordability and consistent use of condoms and water -based lubricants among MSMs. Taking advantage of lessons learned in behavior change communication activities, projects and materials targeting MSMs from other PSI countries, PSI Romania will also take the lead on implementing formative research to develop MSM specific materials, BCC models and strategies addressing social support, condom use barriers, risk reduction, and partner reduction issues. Once materials and models are developed, PSI Romania will collaborate with ACCEPT's outreach team to implement the activities.

This project will strengthen the institutional capacity of ACCEPT in Bucharest and its local LGBT partners in Cluj, Timisoara, Sibiu, Valea, Jiului, Constanta, , and Brasov. ACCEPT will take the lead to increase; 1) counseling for MSMs and encourage testing for STI/HIV/AIDS, 2) access to non-discriminatory health services, 3) strategic public relations and lobbying campaigns with key decision-makers, 4) collaborative agreements with health NGOs and Ministry of Health and Family to increase services provided in non-discriminatory manner with MSMs, and 5) provide information on sexual health and other health services on websites, emails, news letters, leaflets, posters and booklets.

MSM Activities

ACCEPT and PSI Romania propose to implement the following specific project activities:

- 1) **Formative research with MSM** to develop appropriate materials and strategies promoting safer sexual behaviors. A baseline KAP survey will be implemented the first year of the project and then measured against the same KAP survey in year four to determine behavior change and measure impact indicators.
- 2) **Develop & implement behavior change models** that generate positive cultural and social norms of condom use and overcome barriers to safer sex and condom use;
- 3) **Develop research based and innovative**, interactive and entertaining safer sex materials and programs targeting MSM in Romania, (ie, games, posters, leaflets, brochures, and videos);
- 4) **Conduct safer sex parties** targeting MSM using innovative materials and edutainment, also increase condom and lubricant distribution through these events;
- 5) **Increase access of condoms and lubricants** through national social

marketing of water-based lubricant and latex condoms system with commercial channels. Water based lubricant is a product key to promoting safer sex with MSM, but they currently are not easily available or affordable in Romania.

- 6) **Train outreach workers** to increase the number of MSMs receiving information through interpersonal activities in high-risk areas.
- 7) **Increase the number of outreach activities** specifically targeting male CSWs in high-risk zones in Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj and Timisoara.
- 8) **Establish regular medical counseling services** at the ACCEPT office in Bucharest and in other affiliates such as Mari Stopes International (MSI) and SECS clinics where possible.
- 9) **Provide pre-test counseling** and support on completing STI/HIV/AIDS testing.
- 10) **Implement health workshops** for MSMs to provide extensive information on STI/HIV/AIDS and various other health issues.
- 11) **Establish collaborative agreements with health NGOs and key departments within MOHF** to inform of and lobby for non-discriminatory health and social services for MSMs.
- 12) **Provide health & social services specific for male CWS** ie. Mobile unit, medical counseling, HIV counseling and health workshops.
- 13) **Develop informational materials to increase awareness of legal, social, health, and vocational issues.** Examples of materials are newsletter, email, website, booklet, poster, and leaflets.
- 14) **Sponsor press events and training sessions for the media** to present accurate and de-stigmatize information about STI/HIV/AIDS and disadvantaged populations.
- 15) **Implement training sessions with local police** on avoiding discriminating against CSWs, MSMs and other disadvantaged populations while also providing important positive messages about preventing STI/HIV/AIDS.

Major achievements and problems

Although homosexuality is no longer perceived officially as a disease that needs treatment in psychiatry hospitals, attitudes against homosexuality influence the behaviour of the medical personnel in the health care system and the related sectors¹.

General attitudes towards sexuality are a controversial issue in Romania today. According to a study conducted by ACCEPT in 2002², national opinion polls still report a significant lack of awareness of the vulnerability of LGBT people, and a lack of general

¹ Only 12,5% of the physicians interviewed by ACCEPT in 2002 declared they felt comfortable having LGBT people as colleagues at their workplace. Their level of intolerance toward LGBT persons seems to be similar to that of the general population, in this respect.

² *The Sexual Behavior of MSM in Bucharest*, a research study conducted by ACCEPT with the support of the European Commission.

knowledge of sexuality related matters. The official statistics issued by the Romanian Ministry of Health show that the incidence of HIV/AIDS among men having sex with men (MSM) is low (5% of the AIDS cases have acknowledged transmission by homosexual relations). But because of discrimination against the LGBT, MSM avoid disclosing their sexual orientation in public or before a physician.

LGBT people in Romania still need sources of information, role models, and access to services that respond to their needs and give them a sense of identity and self-esteem. They need special medical counselling and services, special health promotion and HIV/STI prevention projects.

Positive health public policies and procedures regarding LGBT people's physical, emotional and sexual health have started to be address in order to reduce stigmatisation. Public education and mobilisation campaigns need to be designed to change public opinion and inform the LGBT community of emerging health issues.

Lobby and advocacy

Lobby and advocacy are essential in promoting MSMs interest and rights on public agenda. As an example, the partnerships between non-governmental organisations and governmental agencies needed to be recognised and implemented by the National Commission for the Supervision, Control and Prevention of HIV/AIDS (ACCEPT was one of the main advocates for such a partnership). As Mr. Michael Cashman, Member of the European Parliament put it, the National Commission should involve "civil society as an equal-footing partner in developing and implementing health public policies of national interest".³

Outreach actions

Outreach activities are those in which the ACCEPT team of volunteers, health officer and/or physician (depending on the situation) provide information on HIV/STI's prevention and health and social services (including HIV/STI's testing), peer-support and safe sex articles (such as condoms and lubricants) by going to places where LGBT can be reached, such as cruising areas and LGBT friendly bars or other places. The outreach activities are a must, since they ensure a proactive approach of ACCEPT in reaching beneficiaries, in comparison with the more passive approach of waiting for beneficiaries to access services at ACCEPT headquarters or other institutions.

The outreach activity is the most important link to the LGBT community. During outreach, the outreach team performed different type of activities on the field, as follows: mapping the sites, first contacts, street conversations, small informative sessions and informal discussions aiming behavioral change. Field conversations between LGBT peers (volunteers and clients) usually covered the following topics: interaction between sexual behavior and alcohol use, general information about HIV/AIDS&STI (signs, symptoms,

³ Michael Cashman's letter to the Romanian Prime Minister, Adrian Nastase, 26 November 2002.

transmission, diagnosis, treatment and prophylaxis), the availability of preventive, diagnosis and therapeutic services, worries about if oral sex is 100% safe, making choices, being faithful in relationships, about the thought of doing a HIV test, about loosing erections when using condoms etc.

The outreach team observed that the MSM clients felt free to express personal values regarding their sexual health. The connection between health and human rights was fairly understood by the clients. Still a lot of them were reporting unfair treatment by health care officials (especially heterosexual males) when accessing health services.

The presentations about HIV/AIDS&STI were customized for the educational level and the values of the MSM in the field. However, the outreach team observed that by organizing small contests, they were more likely to attract MSM clients' attention on presentations of different health subjects. As a result, the team stimulated discussions by offering safer sex articles (condoms and lubricants) as prizes in small "round the table" contests or in different raffles that involved attention of a bigger number of clients. Also, during outreach, volunteers paid special attention to discussing prevention issues with opinion leaders within the LGBT community – as they are a very good vehicle for transporting prevention messages throughout the community.

Also, during outreach actions the outreach team distributed informational/educational materials.

All the services were also promoted when going in outreach and some of ACCEPT clients came to access project services at headquarters after being reached out on the field.

Networking

Through an extensive research and communication process, ACCEPT identified in-country organizations active in the field of education for health that planned to / were willing to initiate prevention projects for the LGBT population in their area.

ACCEPT co-signed **collaboration agreements** on prevention issues & access to different social /health services inclusive for LGBT with **8** in-country organizations, for the year 2003 – with **12** in-country organizations and the organization is currently discussing the possibility of signing new agreements with **6** other NGOs.

ACCEPT sustained the efforts for inclusive prevention activities by supplying of its partner NGOs with condoms (mainly). Each condom distributed by ACCEPT is wrapped in a cardboard kit containing sexual health information that is relevant to LGBT, too.

ACCEPT also provided its partner NGOs with other types of resources: sexual water based lubricants and posters, flyers, materials produced by ACCEPT or other organizations. And, where possible ACCEPT linked these NGOs to local LGBT volunteer groups in order for them to have better access to the local LGBT community.

ACCEPT identified multiple benefits coming out from this activity:

- LGBT population in cities other than Bucharest was able to access increasingly non-discriminatory and professional health services (ACCEPT can only serve the community in Bucharest);
- HIV/AIDS & STI prevention networking with in-country NGOs became more dynamic (which is a plus in fighting HIV/AIDS & STI transmission);
- at least **8** in-country organizations gaining experience in working with LGBT population in their areas (with informational and technical help from ACCEPT also);
- at least **6** in-country organizations developing/sustaining prevention projects for LGBT population in cities other than Bucharest (with informational and technical help from ACCEPT also);
- contribution to combating the stigma & prejudice according to which "only children, prostitutes and homosexuals can contract HIV/AIDS" through the message "AIDS can affect everyone irrespective of sexual orientation" (included in the cardboard kit).
- contribution to raising awareness about biases and incorrect information about sexual orientation and (trans)gender identity in Romania.