



BULLETIN #4

FEBRUARY - DECEMBER 2020

Increased Resilience of Syrian Armenians and Host Population

IRIS PROGRAMME



With funding from
Austrian
Development
Cooperation



EU Funded Increased Resilience of Syrian Armenians and Host Population (IRIS) Programme – The objective of IRIS is to contribute to the National Integration Policy that intends to guarantee a dignified life for Syrian Armenians in Armenia through full protection and integration, with the specific objective to improve social and economic resilience of Syrian Armenians and host population and to strengthen institutional capacities for economic growth in Armenia. The programme is being implemented by the consortium consisting of the Armenian Caritas Benevolent NGO, Armenian Red Cross Society, Centre for Coordination of Syrian Armenians' Issues NGO, SME Cooperation Association and led by the Austrian Red Cross. Save the Children is associate partner to the programme. IRIS programme is funded by the European Union, through the [EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the EU 'MADAD' Fund](#), Austrian Development Cooperation and Austrian Red Cross.

This bulletin is covering [EU IRIS programme](#) activities for the period of February-December 2020. During this challenging period the IRIS programme showed its exceptional importance from another angle and whenever is possible targeting also Lebanese Armenians arriving in Armenia as well as those who was affected from the COVID-19 and conflict over Nagorno Karabakh. In a very short period of time the IRIS programme restructured all its activities in a way to reach the initial targets. With its activities the IRIS programme contributes to the development of the Armenian economy by providing grants and loans to SME sector, it opened psycho-social assistance also to COVID-19 affected people, continued provision of rental subsidies as well as food and hygiene parcels which during times of curfew and total/partial lockdown was extremely important.



First Grant and Loan Agreements are signed

September in the calendar of [EU funded IRIS Business Incubator](#) was marked as a month for [finalization of the 1st business incubation cycle of the IRIS BI](#) which started in October 2019. Before reaching this point, it was a really challenging time for the Business Incubator: after the first round of the pitching sessions held in the end of February, participants were selected for further development of their business ideas through a wide range of trainings and tailored consultations (so called 'IRIS Academy'). However, in March the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Armenia leading to the State of Emergency, lockdown and full curfew, thus making it impossible to organise face to face BI Academy as was planned initially. The IRIS BI team understood the uniqueness and importance the Business Incubator for the economy of Armenia as well as its exceptional role in the SME sector and quickly reshaped the activities and continued with [provision of consultations and IRIS Academy classes via online means](#). After several months of tense educational activities and consultations, the BI residents were ready for pitching of their business plans which that time [was held online](#) – challenging for both BI residents as well as the jury members and the BI staff. Eventually, after these last pitches as well as security and financial checking procedures contracts were signed with 44 beneficiaries (out of 73 shortlisted) of the Business Incubator, who as a result received not only financial assistance but also further IRIS BI incubation support for at least another 6 months period.



End of the September was marked in the history of the South Caucasus region with heavy 44 days long conflict over Nagorno Karabakh territory, due to which martial law was imposed in the Republic of Armenia, thus literally collapsing ordinary work of the EU IRIS Programme as well as Business Incubator. Nevertheless, on 5th of November the [2nd call for applications](#) was announced by the IRIS Business Incubator with the deadline 12th of December, during which 452 applications for business ideas were received by the IRIS BI. Initial assessment of applications and shortlist of participants will be done in until mid of January 2021, when shortlisted participants will be invited for Business Idea pitching sessions.

During pasts months the IRIS Business Incubator also did a huge step forward in terms of presenting its activities publicly, in particular through the [IRIS BI website](#) launched in April as well as through videos on [success stories](#), its [foundation and operation](#), on already [achieved results and 2nd call for applications](#), monitoring visits and many more, which can be easily found in the media section of IRIS BI website or by clicking [here](#).

COVID-19 challenges IRIS Traineeship

Within the framework of the Economic Integration component of the [EU IRIS Programme](#) the [Armenian Red Cross Society](#) (ARCS) continues implementing traineeship activities. Earlier this year the 3rd public call for applications was announced by ARCS, and all 105 applicants were invited for the interviews which were held on 5th and 6th of March. After the interviews the selection committee consisting of representatives of Armenian Red Cross Society, Austrian Red Cross and State Employment Agency approved 38 applicants, 11 applicants were marked as pending cases, 15 were rejected while 39 applicants didn't show up for the interviews at all. Right after interviews the State of Emergency was announced by the Government in Armenia, with the lockdown and further full curfew.

Despite all these restrictions the traineeship component continued its activities whenever possible online. Otherwise conditions with possible employers for new trainees were agreed and contracts were prepared, which eventually were signed during summer and autumn this year. Until now 73 Syrian Armenians and local Armenians participated in the traineeships, out of which 57 now have permanent employment afterwards.

In mid-November another traineeship selection committee was held for applications received during summer or which were referred by the case managers and social workers of the IRIS Programme without



announcement of public call. As a results 7 applicants were approved for traineeships.

Recently, the [4th public call for applications](#) was announced by ARCS with the deadline of 20th December 2020. Within the 3 months' traineeship activity trainees receive 125 EUR monthly remuneration – in order to get temporary employment with possibility to enhance their skills – and after successful completion of their assignments and on availability of vacant position they will have a permanent job contract.



IRIS programme fights against COVID-19 in the housing sphere

During COVID-19 restrictions and State of Emergency imposed in the country many people remained without job which has its fatal impact also on Syrian Armenians being more vulnerable. The need of provision of housing subsidies rose dramatically, many organizations reshaped their projects, and budgets were allocated for provision of rental subsidies. The [EU IRIS Programme](#) still continues to play the main role in this sector, being the only programme which still has foreseen budget for provision of the rental subsidies until June 2021 with the biggest number of beneficiaries. As of today, the EU IRIS programme reached 220 vulnerable Syrian Armenian families by providing rental subsidies support. In total 240'000 EUR were disbursed by Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) within the EU IRIS Programme, each month reaching 100 most vulnerable Syrian Armenian families and supporting them with 100 EUR. For the selection of most vulnerable Syrian Armenian families living in Armenia as well as to avoid any double-funding a Housing Selection Committee was formed which meets several times per year to select the most vulnerable Syrian Armenian families, who then receive 100 EUR rental subsidies per month from the EU IRIS Programme. More on this, please read in our [3rd edition of IRIS Bulletin](#).



Besides the monthly rental subsidy payments, the EU IRIS programme aims to find sustainable housing solutions and to develop a sustainable housing model for middle income Syrian Armenian families. For that specific reason, the [Housing Consortium](#) is active under the lead of ARCS. In the beginning of the year it selected [ADWISE Consulting](#) which – in spite of the COVID-19 restrictions – did a research, held online meetings and interviews with stakeholders, donors, banks etc. and in the beginning of December presented the draft Sustainable Housing Solution concept paper with two models of financing. It is worth to mention that during the whole research activities, which was consisting of three phases, consultants were in close contact with the ARCS programme coordinator for Housing and Employment Issues and also after each phase of the research draft report and findings were presented to the Housing Consortium and further were revised according to its feedback.

Next meeting of the Housing Consortium will be held in the beginning of the 2021 where already a more practical activity plan should be elaborated on further implementation of the Concept Paper as well as development of the housing strategy based on the already existing Concept Paper.



From Case Managers to frontline fighters against the humanitarian catastrophe Caused by COVID-19

Case management activities of the [EU IRIS Programme](#) which are being provided by the case managers of Armenian Caritas and Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS), under the lead and coordination of ARCS became one of the important activities especially during COVID-19 restriction times. Besides the increased number of vulnerable Syrian Armenians asking for support through case managers, another difficulty for the case managers was the COVID-19 restrictions and State of Emergency in the country which collapsed all the activities of the social workers by restricting them from doing house visits and assessments for housing components as well as meeting beneficiaries in person to understand more properly the needs and provide required support. However, case managers quickly adapted themselves to the new reality, they substitute house visits and assessments with phone calls and a special regulation within ARCS was elaborated for meetings with the beneficiaries in the office.

Since the beginning of the EU IRIS Programme 240 Syrian Armenian families have received – and most of them continue receiving – case management support and mitigate their problems through the support provided and referrals to other projects done by the small team of case managers. This small team of the case managers this year became frontline fighters against the problems caused by the COVID-19.

Important to note, the fact that big part of the Armenian national COVID-19 response activities were and are being implemented by Armenian Red Cross Society, proved the importance of coordination of this activity by ARCS, which made it way easier to coordinate activities between other COVID-19 support projects by creating synergies and to provide needs based support to the beneficiaries way faster.

EU IRIS Info-Hub amidst COVID-19

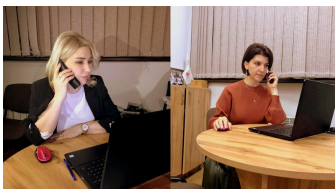
During COVID-19 restrictions and limitations, Info-Hub activities of the [EU IRIS Programme](#) implemented by the [Centre for Coordination of Syrian Armenians' Issues](#) (CCSAI) one more time showed their exceptional importance for bringing information to the targeted audience and creating bridges between service providers and beneficiaries. Even though during the State of Emergency CCSAI closed its doors for beneficiaries, it continued providing information and did the referrals through phone calls. The [brochure](#) of the available services for Syrian Armenians continued being updated and published both on the website of Armenian Red Cross Society and the [IRIS programme website](#), and it is actively promoted through the CCSAI social media channel on regular basis.



Another important activity of CCSAI is the organization of coordination meetings with managers and heads of all organisations and projects providing any kind of services to Syrian Armenians as well as information sessions with the case managers, psychologists and referral officers with the aim to ensure that first contact points with the beneficiaries are up to date on available services. During last months one coordination meeting was organized online in June, and one [information session](#) in September for case managers which was highly appreciated by the all participants.

PSS Centre responds with HOTLINE to COVID-19

From the very first days of the COVID-19 restrictions, [EU IRIS programme's](#) Psycho-Social Support (PSS) Centre run by the Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) "opened its doors" wider to public. Even though all meetings and events with physical presence were cancelled, but hotlines were installed in the PSS centre and psychologists started to provide psychological first aid both to Syrian Armenians and Local Armenians, those who have been stressed because of the situation in Armenia caused by the COVID-19. In addition, to continue social integration and networking of the Syrian Armenians, online Viber and WhatsApp groups were created, where psychologists continued implementation of group consultations and group-based integration activities. Already in June, during curfew several events were organised in Zoom platform of ARCS on cooking, stress management, Psychological First Aid for more than 40 persons in total, in July were held two more online events on Healthy Lifestyle and cooking. However in September face to face



meetings were resumed and a trip was organised to the town of Echmiadzin, and another event was devoted to studying national dances.

At the end we would like to note that the role and activities of the PSS centre during COVID-19 and other crisis times became very notable and valuable. Just to mention, that currently the number of PSS beneficiaries exceeds 480 individuals (140 more beneficiaries than in the beginning of the year) who participate to the group based integration support activities, and almost 280 beneficiaries constantly reach to the PSS Centre to receive individual consultations which is 100 individuals more than in the beginning of 2020.

Older People are NEVER alone

Older people living in dormitories remain one of the important targets of the Psycho-Social Support (PSS) component of the [EU IRIS Programme](#), which is not limited only to the work of the PSS Centre run by Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS). Within these activities ARCS volunteers distribute food and hygiene parcels for the most vulnerable older people living in dormitories of Hrazdan, Abovyan and Yerevan municipalities. Besides food and hygiene parcels which since last summer also include COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as gloves, antiseptics and face masks, 20 volunteers who passed specific trainings also support older people with daily household tasks. Of course, during COVID-19 restrictions and limitation period volunteers decreased their face to face meetings with beneficiaries, however they found other ways such as daily video calls to maintain contact with the older people. As of November, in the framework of EU IRIS Programme volunteers of the ARCS already have distributed 1'800 food and hygiene parcels to more than 317 older people.

Besides supporting with daily tasks, also some sight-seeing activities and social events are being organised for lonely vulnerable older people. Right after lifting the COVID-19 restrictions in Armenia, ARCS volunteers organised a trip to Saghmosavank and Ohanavank for the older people from dormitories of Yerevan.

"I was lonely when both my husband and the only son passed away. I felt isolated, with no light at the end of the tunnel. Everything was changed with my young volunteers first visit ..." [more about trip here](#)

Education as KEY for integration

Despite restrictions and movement limitations imposed by the Government of Armenia due to COVID-19 outbreak, Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) continues implementation of the educational activities of the [EU IRIS Programme](#) strongly believing that **"No integration is possible without education"**. The EU IRIS Programme within educational component has foreseen three different type of classes, in particular Tolerance Education (TE) classes for pupils of elementary schools, Child Resilience Classes (CRP) for both elementary and primary schools' pupils and Psychological First Aid (PFA) classes for teachers, schools' psychologists and representatives of state and non-state actors etc. More about specifics of each classes can be read in our [3rd edition of the Bulletin](#).

During these months TE classes were held in 6 schools of Yerevan, where in total 90 teachers passed Training of Trainers (ToT) on Tolerance Education and organised classes for 2'910 pupils. Since the beginning of the implementation of the EU IRIS Programme ARCS organised ToT of TE classes for 186 teachers from 12 schools, which in their turn organised TE classes for 6'020 pupils (3'067 girls and 2'963 boys). Currently Tolerance Education ToTs are being organised for the new group of the teachers.

Unlike TE classes, CRP classes could not be fully held in physical settings due to the examinations periods of the pupils and later also due to limitations on physical gathering imposed by the Government because of the wide spread of COVID-19 in the country, however the staff of ARCS quickly reshaped the modules of classes to the new normal or online reality and held remaining classes' modules online via zoom. Thence CRP classes during this period were completed in four schools by reaching 76 pupils. CRP session were held in 9 schools and 2 dormitories, in total reaching 196 young people. Currently, CRP classes became more important due to the new humanitarian crisis caused by the escalation of Nagorno Karabakh conflict and with arrivals of thousands of people including children from the conflict region to Armenia and ARCS has expanded CRP activities with classes being held in shelters and hotels for children affected by the conflict.

Eventually, PFA classes one more time stressed their importance especially during time of crisis which faced Armenia twice: in the beginning of year with COVID-19 crisis and in late September escalation over Nagorno Karabakh. Details about PFA classes can be found in the [2nd edition of the Bulletin](#). Here we would like to note that as of November, more than 224 teachers, representatives of state and non-state stakeholders were trained on Psychological First Aid classes.

Young People Matter

Within the [EU IRIS Programme](#), another important integration activity implemented by the Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) is Youth Resilience Project, which consists of two parts: youth innovation camps and seed grants. In August two [Youth Innovation Camps](#) were held in Aghveran for in total 30 young people where they learned how to translate innovative ideas into projects. After two full days of workshops these young people with constant support of ARCS educational staff wrote their project proposals and applied for the seed grants. The selection committee for the seed grants is planned to be held in the end of December via online means.

Previous winners of the seed grants unfortunately had delays in the implementation of their projects mostly because of the State of Emergency and later Martial Law imposed by the Government of Armenia which was continued by unstable political situation accompanied with daily demonstrations in the streets. However, some of the seed grants will be finalised sometimes in December and we will elaborate in more details on these seed grants in our next programme Bulletin.

From Idea to a Sustainable Project

The summer camps are always full of excitement and expectations. During the previous week 30 bright Syrian-Armenian and local young people, aged 15 to 30, participated in the Youth Capacity Development Summer Innovation Camps organized by the Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) in the framework of EU funded "Increased Resilience of Syrian Armenians and Host Population" (IRIS) Programme... *"It makes me happy to realize that I can bring a smile to children's faces" ... [Read more](#)*



The role of the Housing Consortium

The home should provide stability, privacy, and a sense of belonging and integration. This approach works for the Housing Support Strategic Component of the of "Increased Resilience of Syrian Armenians and Host Population" (IRIS) Programme funded by the European Union, through the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the EU 'Madad' Fund, Austrian Development Cooperation, and Austrian Red Cross Society... *"The Housing Consortium... delivered the needed support to them as quickly as possible"...* [Read more](#)

Alleviating Excursion for Older People

The caring support towards older people creates mutual trust. This was the slogan of Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) volunteers who on 27 September with the support of "Increased Resilience of Syrian Armenians and Host Population" (IRIS) Programme organized a one-day excursion to Saghmosavank and Ohanavank 13th-century Armenian monasteries for lonely older people living in dormitories...*"Now when I am in my "golden years" I am thankful to these young people"...* [Read more](#)

EU Supported IRIS Business Incubator's Grants and Loans of 2020

EU supported IRIS Business Incubator (BI) is delighted to announce the total number of loans and grants disbursed in 2020 to its residents. The first of the major achievements of IRIS BI during 2020 is the 44 winner residents with their bright ideas and businesses. The second significant achievement is the overview of overall grant support during 2020 to business... [Read more](#)

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ARMENIAN CARITAS



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