



Contents lists available at Canadian Scientific Journal

Canadian Scientific Journal

journal homepage: www.csjournal.ca



Childhood in peril: the interaction between vulnerability and resiliency in the framework of the protection of children from trafficking in Armenia

Antonyan Mira*

Yerevan State University, Faculty of Sociology, Yerevan, Armenia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 March 2015

Received in revised form 14 March 2015

Accepted 6 May 2015

Keywords:

Child trafficking

Prevention

Resiliency

Vulnerability

Comprehensive reform

ABSTRACT

This article discusses participatory research conducted among children and specialists working in the child trafficking field in Armenia by the Armenian Association of Social Workers. This article examines the interaction of children's vulnerability and their level resiliency to child trafficking. In doing so, the article identifies major gaps in the prevention and identification of child trafficking and major failures of rehabilitation services for children who have been trafficked. The author presents general and specific recommendations that will enable Armenia to create implementation mechanisms in accordance with the legislation it has adopted for the effective prevention, identification, and rehabilitation of victims of child trafficking. In particular, the author argues that changes must occur not only within the scope of trafficking, but also in intersecting areas, with particular attention to juvenile justice and sexual education. However, since marginalized children are the most vulnerable to trafficking, the author argues that the implementation of comprehensive reforms in the area of child and family protection will be necessary to end on-the ground concerns about child trafficking in Armenia.

© 2015 Canadian Scientific Journal. All Rights reserved

1. Introduction

Despite the harmonization of Armenia's legislation on human trafficking with European Union and international standards, the prevention of child trafficking in Armenia will only truly be accomplished if policies are accompanied by comprehensive implementation plans and actions. Thus, a comprehensive program to combat child trafficking and exploitation and its consequences for vulnerable children in Armenia must be created, including a focus on prevention of child trafficking, identification of cases of child trafficking, and rehabilitation of children who have been trafficked.¹

* Corresponding author at: Yerevan State University, Faculty of Sociology, Alek Manukyan 1, Yerevan, Armenia. Tel.: +37460 540150; Fax: + 37410 240121

E-mail addresses: antonyan.mira@gmail.com (M. Antonyan)

¹ For the purposes of this article, internationally accepted definitions will be used. Child trafficking is therefore defined as the illegal movement of children and child exploitation is defined as the unfair treatment of a child by one or more person who benefit from their work.

2. Analysis of recent research

A considerable issue in Armenia's social sector is the current lack of appropriate, effective research, and the field of child trafficking is no exception. Most research on child trafficking examines the issue at the macro level, attempting to describe general trends. One of the most valued reports on child trafficking in Armenia, and indeed trafficking worldwide, comes from the US Country Reports on Child Trafficking, which provides a brief analysis and general recommendations for each country. The report also categorizes each country into one of four possible levels of response to trafficking. According to the Trafficking in Persons Report 2014 from the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, USA (2014), Armenia is considered Tier 1, a status given to countries whose governments fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act's minimum standards. The US report claims that Armenia's government has improved "anti-trafficking coordination and collaboration in an effort to narrow gaps in policies, legislation, and practices" (p. 78). It is a great accomplishment for Armenia to be recognized by the international community for growing compliance with International Trafficking laws.

However, although Tier 1 status is the highest status a country may attain, as The Embassy of the United States to Armenia (2013) cautioned when Armenia first received Tier 1 status in 2013, such a ranking "does not mean that a country has no human trafficking problem". This reminder that "a country is never finished with the job of fighting trafficking" conveys the difficulty of presenting a realistic picture of Armenian's situation by examining only policy level standards and official records (Embassy of the United States to Armenia, 2013). Makaryan and Chobanyan (2014) note that "the adoption, albeit only symbolically, of [anti-trafficking] policies...gives global legitimacy to nation-states" (p. 62). Consequently, Makaryan and Chobanyan (2014) would argue that Armenia's Tier 1 Status is a legitimizing experience and such legitimization is part of the reason the government of Armenia has readily complied with international standards on a policy level.

Another major report on trafficking is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE's) "Assessment of Current Responses" in the Trafficking of Human Beings (2007). This report provides an analysis of policies, but also goes one step further to include the views and opinions of Armenia's key stakeholders in the trafficking field. However, this report falls short on the issue of child trafficking since it describes the factors that surround trafficking in general, rather than providing specific information on the experiences of children. The OSCE report (2007) recognizes this shortfall, with the authors noting in its recommendations the need for "special provisions for protection of trafficked children" (p. 31). However, the report mentions only registered cases of child trafficking and does not include an analysis of children's vulnerability or the views of children in its examination.

In general, research on the phenomenon of child trafficking does not see an understanding of the on-the-ground reality as necessary requisite. In fact, a review of research and reports in the field of child trafficking show that precise statistics on victims of child trafficking are non-existent (International Organization for Migration 2001; Grigorian 2005; Armenian Relief Society 2006; Child Protection Strategic Programme 2005; United Methodist Committee on Relief 2007; Dashevskiy 2007; Dottridge 2008; etc.). These reports instead examine general trends and forms of trafficking.

Research and analysis of child protection issues in general also often touch upon the issue of child

trafficking. However, in most cases, such research again refers only to statistics provided by the police and governmental ministries and, therefore, does not provide an accurate picture of trafficking in Armenia. For example, the Child Protection Strategic Programme (2013-2016) states that Armenia does not have problems of sexual exploitation and child sale, while specialists with experience working with children directly contradict this official claim. For instance, Hilda Grigorian (2005) of the Armenian International Policy Research Group contested that, in fact, young girls from orphanages were often sold across borders and forced to conduct sexual acts. These obviously differing views on one form of child trafficking and exploitation prove that research relying solely on official records provide not a representation of reality, but a representation of a referral and identification system which sometimes fails.

Based on this analysis of research in the field of child trafficking, it is apparent that appropriate, reliable research that takes into account the vulnerability of children is not available in Armenia. This is a frightening prospect, as the creation of implementation plans on the issue of child trafficking depends upon an accurate understanding of the issue.

3. Statement of research objectives

As National President of The Armenian Association of Social Workers (AASW), the author conducted participatory research with children from both public schools and institutions and with specialists working in the child trafficking field in Armenia.² The overall goal of the research is to justify the need for further reform to the country's approach to combatting child trafficking and exploitation. Under the scope of this goal, the research objectives are to (1) examine child trafficking issues in Armenia through a rights-based, participatory approach; (2) fill in the gaps in prior research on the vulnerability of children to child trafficking; and (3) identify the major gaps in legislation protecting children from trafficking and exploitation in Armenia. This research examines the children's understanding of trafficking, attitudes towards trafficking, and resiliency to trafficking. It also examines specialist's opinions on the systems gaps in the identification and rehabilitation of children who have been trafficked.

4. Results & Recommendations

The analysis of children's opinions and understanding of child trafficking provides a needed platform for the voices of children themselves to comment on the issue of child trafficking in Armenia. The issues uncovered through this research should be addressed by the government of Armenia. In addition, several of the issues identified are actually outside the specific scope of child trafficking, affecting children in other situations as well. Therefore, the research leads to recommendations for changes both in the implementation of existing legislation on child trafficking and via changes to other means and structures, such as the establishment of

² Examples of institutions in Armenia include orphanages, short-term care facilities, a special school, etc.

an effective juvenile justice system for children and youth.

In particular, three intersecting issues are revealed by the research. First, vulnerable children have a low level of understanding of trafficking and its manifestations. Second, a conflict of values exists amongst children who do have an awareness of trafficking and exploitation. Finally, there is a serious risk of double traumatization for children who have been trafficked when they come into contact with Armenia's current child trafficking support system.

4.1 Low Awareness of Trafficking and its Forms

While international and local NGOs, with the support of the government of Armenia, have spent considerable effort on raising awareness of the issue of child trafficking in Armenia, the author's study shows that a substantial amount of confusion exists as to what exactly trafficking is. For instance, children are more likely to identify and understand types of child trafficking, than the phenomenon of trafficking itself.

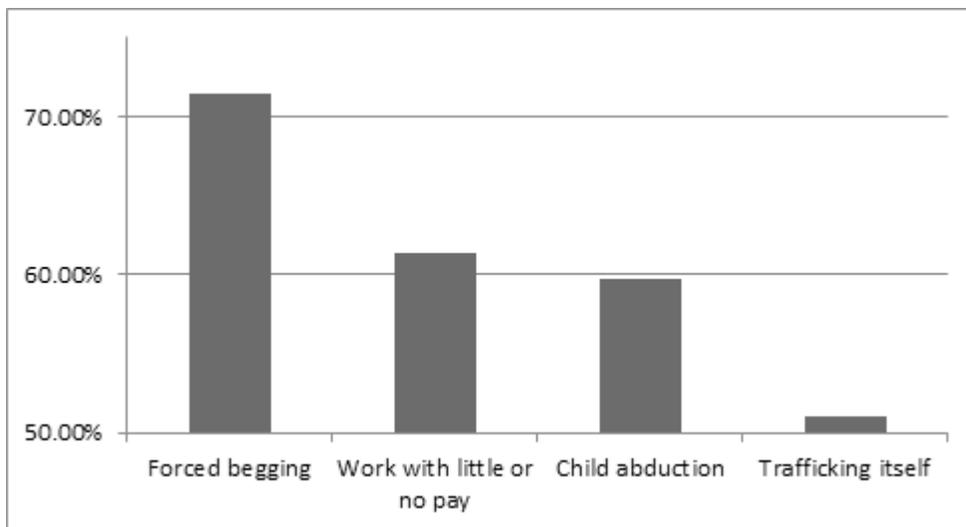


Fig 1. Awareness of forms of trafficking versus the phenomenon of trafficking

While an understanding of the term trafficking may be less important than an understanding of its forms, serious concern can be raised from the fact that certain forms of child trafficking were not identified or acknowledged by the interviewed children. In particular, trafficking forms that are sexual in nature are the least likely to be identified, with only 20% of children identifying cases of child pornography, even when the cases are described using simple words, such as “taking pictures naked”. These gaps in children's knowledge and understanding indicate that an awareness of trafficking itself is not enough to ensure that

children are adequately prepared to avoid being trafficked and to support other children to avoid being trafficked.

Therefore, it is this author's suggestion that sexual education be instituted in Armenia, in order for serious forms of child trafficking and exploitation to be understood and, consequently, avoided. Currently, in both the home and public schools (and most private schools), true sexual education does not exist; the discussion of sex is considered shameful. The true consequences of teachers' decisions to avoid sexual education in schools, despite its formal place in the educational program, are illuminated by the cases of six trafficked, sexually exploited children interviewed. All six children view the trafficker and the sexual exploitation as a fundamentally positive experience; the children felt appreciated and even had feelings of love towards their traffickers. In two cases, the children eagerly agreed to marry their traffickers. Without an understanding of sexual exploitation, children in Armenia continue to be at great risk of trafficking and exploitation specifically in the form of sexual exploitation.³

4.2 Attitudes and Resiliency: Conflict of Values

While NGOs have implemented a campaign and used its resources to raise awareness of the phenomenon of child trafficking amongst children and families, the author's research has shown that this is certainly not enough to prevent trafficking and exploitation. Higher levels of awareness of child trafficking, especially only of its non-sexual manifestations, is not a solution by itself. To the contrary, the research indicates that a child's level of awareness of trafficking does not directly impact the child's resilience to trafficking and exploitation. Instead, children identified as vulnerable to trafficking are the most likely to have a high level of awareness of trafficking and/or its various forms.

Children at high risk of being trafficked are children who are already vulnerable due to other issues in their lives.⁴ The research identifies the most vulnerable children to be youth from impoverished families. The youth are most commonly between the ages of 14 to 17 and have a low level of education. The research shows, for example, that awareness of trafficking is higher amongst extremely poor children than children who are not poor, and higher amongst children who have been in an institution than children who have not been in an institution.

³ This issue also intersects with the issue of double traumatization, as these children all found it extremely difficult to see their trafficker (who was not a bad person in their eyes) be put on trial and, in some cases, go to prison.

⁴ Vulnerable children include all marginalized children. Examples include a child from a very poor family, a child who has been abused, a child who comes from a refugee family, a child with only one parent, a child from a rural area, a child who is not in school, etc.

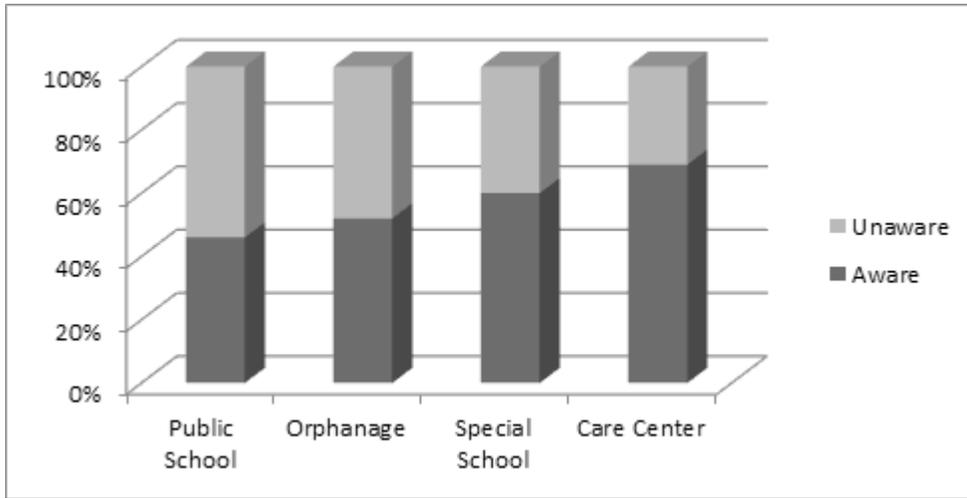


Fig 2. Awareness of Children per Type of Institution

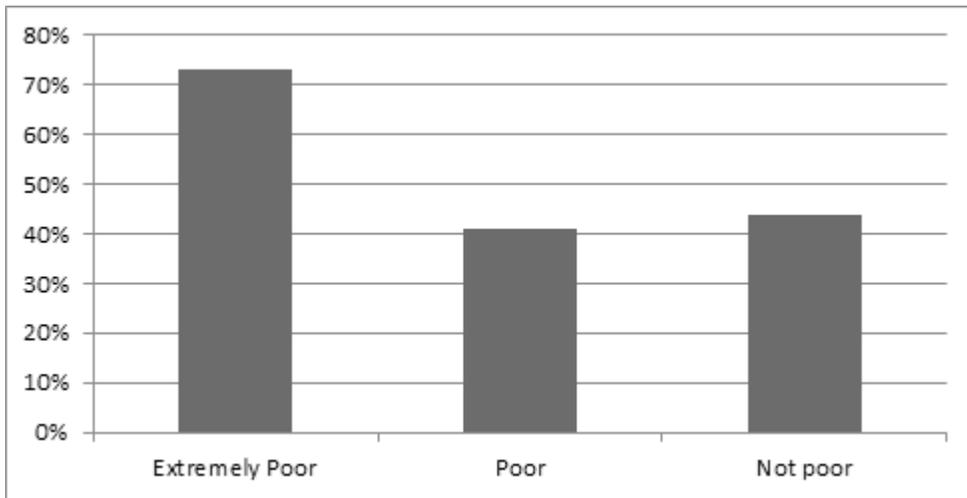


Fig 3. Awareness of Trafficking According to Family Well-Being

The research reveals that a major reason that a higher level of awareness did not make these children less vulnerable to trafficking is that children from vulnerable families experience a conflict of values in situations of trafficking and exploitation. That is to say, children who understand what trafficking is, or at least its specific manifestations, and agree that it is wrong, still state without reservation that they will knowingly and intentionally partake in such actions in order to protect or support their family. For instance, the majority of children state that if their family is in need, they are ready to work under any conditions, including relocating

away from the family. In fact, in most cases of unfair and unfavorable conditions, children are likely to agree to work to support their family.

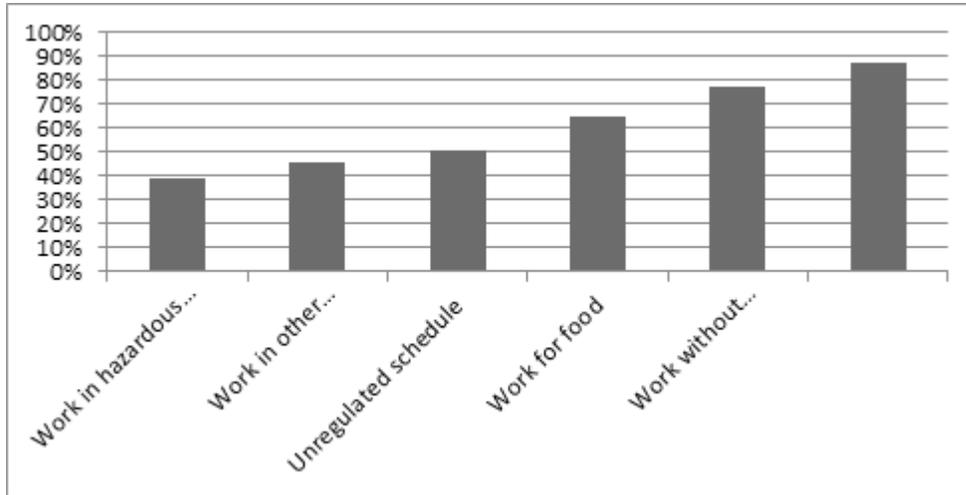


Fig 4. Children's Readiness to Work in Unfavorable Conditions to Support their Family

This means that more vulnerable children (those whose families need support) are more likely to become victims of child trafficking than less vulnerable children, regardless of their level of awareness of child trafficking. Interpretation of this situation may be that children from extremely poor, socially vulnerable families are more aware of difficulties, more empathetic to their parents' problems, and more involved in the families' circumstances than children in poor or not poor families. This also means that children's devotion to their families may easily be exploited by traffickers, who use manipulation to assure the child that he or she must work in order to save his or her family. For the legislation that the Armenian government has signed to have a true impact on the lives of Armenian children, it is necessary for children to experience life in a way that does not cause them to enter into exploitation or trafficking of their own free will. Consequently, the strategic approaches taken in Armenia must ensure not only that trafficking, including its so-called 'shameful' forms, are openly discussed and understood, but also that the widespread issue of extreme poverty among children and families in Armenia is addressed.⁵

4.3 Risk of double traumatization

While prevention of trafficking and exploitation is the best possible solution, the protection system must

⁵ 38.1% of children live below the poverty line in Armenia and poverty in children between the ages of 0-9 is higher than poverty in all other groups (National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia, 2010).

also be prepared to adequately address issues of child trafficking when it does occur. Unfortunately, children who have been trafficked are currently at high risk of experiencing double traumatization at the hands of the very adults who are supposed to help them. The author's research reveals that children involved in the post-exploitation rehabilitation are at risk both during the identification phase, when a child approaches or is brought to authorities, and the rehabilitation phase, during which children are, in theory, provided with supports and services to reintegrate into society.

Issues in the identification phase stem from the fact that the country does not currently have the institutional capacity to adequately identify cases of trafficking as trafficking. For instance, a specialist shares that the current system is simply "too complicated", so children who have been trafficked or exploited are often considered in another way, simply to avoid an overly convoluted, confusing process for both the child and the specialist. In other cases, different pieces of legislation may contradict each other. These issues are commonly recognized within the field, with one focus group participant noting that while "the law exists on paper...mechanisms of application are missing".

Perhaps most worryingly, legislation does not refer specifically to children and, consequently, procedures are not modified to be in the best interest of the child. This includes legislation outside of the trafficking field specifically. For instance, common practices and procedures within Armenia's justice system in general may have a major impact on children. In the justice system, children who have been trafficked may go through the process of being interviewed multiple times, revisiting the traumatic experience over and over again, when one recorded interview could have sufficed. These problems are seen across the board in the area of juvenile justice, as the country does not currently have a justice system specifically for juveniles.

While legislation and appropriate structural mechanisms are being harmonized in line with international standards, children who have been trafficked face unique challenges and their needs are not met at the service provision level. First, there is a lack of specialists and a lack of appropriate services. For instance, children who have been trafficked do not currently have the option to stay or even visit a center specific to their psychological and sociological needs. Second, specialists are often not professionally trained and/or lack experience in the field. Cases of child trafficking are often misunderstood by officials and specialists, including representatives of the police, psychologists, and sociologists. An expert interviewed shares that "our [police] investigators treat everybody the same way. A trafficked victim is referred to as a prostitute". Consequently, these specialists are often unable to provide effective support. The source of these issues is usually traceable to the lack of policy implementation in line with the standards adopted on trafficking and exploitation. Adequate training and collaboration amongst institutions must be insured for service providers to offer appropriate services children who have been trafficked or exploited.

Taken together, these issues led one focus group participant to aptly liken the child trafficking situation to the experience of "soldiers without arms". This means that children who have been trafficked are at risk of double-traumatization due to the failures of the system to adequately implement policies and procedures that will support children. Children are victims of a system that lacks resources, lacks effective communication across and within sectors, lacks specialists with training and experience, and lacks general mechanisms necessary for a functioning system to serve identified children who are victims of trafficking. Solutions that provide protection to vulnerable children and support to those who have been exploited or trafficked must

be identified and implemented.

5. Conclusions

The participatory research with children and service providers in Armenia reveals the need for decision makers to effect serious changes in order to effectively uphold its policy level promises to the country's children; policies and legislation in line with international standards should be translated into practice. Vulnerable children in Armenia must be supported through preventative measures, including comprehensive education on trafficking and macro-level policies that will strengthen and support vulnerable children and families. Only with such policies and practical support to vulnerable children and families will children not see their own trafficking and exploitation as a viable option, despite their awareness of the phenomenon. In addition, the government must make major changes to its identification and rehabilitation services for children who have been trafficked. Furthermore, these issues must be addressed outside of the sphere of trafficking; major changes must occur throughout the child protection field, including the development of a juvenile justice system. If these recommendations are implemented, Armenia's children will genuinely benefit from the international standards against trafficking that the government has sworn to uphold.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the European Union's funding of AASW's (headed by Mira Antonyan) "Child Trafficking Phenomenon in Armenia: Study in the Scope of Awareness of Targeted Children and Public" (2010), within the scope of the implementation partner "People in Need" project, "Mobilized and empowered system of prevention of child trafficking in Armenia through awareness raising, capacity building and networking". The contents of this publication and the author's respective research are the sole responsibility of Mira Antonyan and the Armenian Association of Social Workers and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

References

1. Antonyan, Mira (2010). Child Trafficking Phenomenon in Armenia: Study in the Scope of Awareness of Targeted Children and Public. Yerevan: Armenian Association of Social Workers.
2. Armenian Relief Society. Children in Orphanages and Special Schools in Armenia: Potential Victims of Trafficking and Exploitation. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Retrieved from http://www.osce.org/documents/oy/2006/09/20415_en.pdf. Accessed on 10 January 2015.
3. N.A. (2013). Child Protection Strategic Programme. Yerevan: Government of Armenia.
4. Dashevskiy, Igor (2007). Child Protection. Yerevan: UNICEF
5. Dottridge, Mike (2008). Young People's Voices on Child Trafficking: Experiences from South Eastern Europe. Yerevan: UNICEF.
6. Grigorian, Hilda (2005). Human Trafficking in the Republic of Armenia, Armenian International Policy Research Group. Working paper N. 05/05.
7. Embassy of the United States to Armenia (2013). Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. Retrieved from <http://armenia.usembassy.gov/news062013.html>. Accessed 10 January 2015.
8. International Organization for Migration (2001). Trafficking in Women and Children from the Republic of Armenia: A Study. Yerevan: International Organization for Migration. Retrieved from http://www.un.am/up/library/Trafficking_Women_Children_eng.pdf. Accessed 10 January 2015.
9. National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia (2010). Social Snapshot and Poverty in Armenia: Statistical Analytical Report. Yerevan: National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia. Retrieved from <http://www.armstat.am/en/?nid=80&id=1202>. Accessed 10 January 2015.
10. Snajdrova, Hana & Hancilova, Blanka (2007). Trafficking in Human Beings in the Republic of Armenia: Assessment of Current Responses. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.
11. The Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, USA (2014). Country Narratives, Trafficking in Persons Report 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/226845.pdf>
12. United Methodist Committee on Relief (2007). Vulnerability towards Trafficking amongst Inmates of Children's Homes and Special Schools. Yerevan: UMCOR