

## The Armenia Fund Rural Development Program End Year Report

As the countdown to 2008 is nearing the end, it is time to sum up some of the results of the year 2007. This has been a truly milestone year for the Rural Development Program as the bold idea conceived during the 2006 Armenia Diaspora Conference and supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gradually took shape and transformed into a practical mechanism as an integral part of The Armenia Fund.



The concept of rural development by itself is not new. The vital strategic, economic and social importance of developing the rural communities and especially border communities is also common knowledge. In this sense, both the Government and the various local and international structures are actively involved in the field, implementing a range of projects aimed at alleviating this or that issue. Sooner or later these projects will give their fruits. Unfortunately, time is one luxury we cannot afford and the welcome development may come too little too late. Years of deprivations, war, blockade, isolation, lack of infrastructure and jobs have brought forth hopelessness and as a result: emigration. Thus, in another ten to fifteen

years, when the good life comes to the border villages, there may be no one there to enjoy it.

There is no magic wand solution to this issue. Turning the tidal wave is only possible through achieving new levels of cooperation, coordination and channeling of all the available resources in Armenia and the Diaspora at ensuring comprehensive and sustainable development of the border villages in Armenia and Karabakh. This is our task, our goal, our dream: a dream shared by all Armenians around the world.

Bringing that dream down to the real world is a painstaking process. For the last six months we have been engaged in this process carrying out extensive background work on bringing together the various components of the Program. In a sense, this preparatory stage is probably the hardest as most



of the activities are going on under the surface and there are no physically visible results. We are also very much aware of the high expectations both from the Diaspora and the members of border communities as The Armenia Fund has a rich history of undertaking seemingly impossible tasks and successfully completing them.

At the same time, this meticulous preparatory process is the key to the Program's long term success, as it has allowed us to establish the vital cooperation links, to gather both the governmental and non governmental bodies around one table and work out a concrete action plan, where the many diverse projects by different organizations come together in the same area to form one comprehensive solution.



Thus, as a result of extensive negotiations with the governmental institutions, we have been able to solve two of the major infrastructural issues in the Program's pilot Khashtarak cluster encompassing six villages in Tavush region. The Ministry of Finance and Economy will redirect some of the available resources at rehabilitating the roads of the region, while the Ministry of Agriculture has undertaken the task of providing the

communities with access to natural gas.

Lack of access to natural gas is a universal problem in almost all the border villages. Universal problem requires a universal solution and we engaged into active negotiations with ArmRusGasArd. The result of these negotiations is the organization's commitment to co-finance the gasification projects in all the border villages included in the Program.

We are also working on ensuring maximum involvement of local and international organizations. At this point we are working with the following structures:

- Armenia TV
  - Preparation of vocational training DVDs
- Armenia School Foundation
  - Provision of furniture to border village schools
- Armenian Technology Group (ATG)
  - Conducting seminars/trainings in the pilot Khashtarak cluster communities
  - Seed betterment initiatives
- Center for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD)



- Establishment of a milk collection unit, which will serve the needs of the communities in and beyond the cluster
- International Center for Human Development (ICHD)
  - Conducting community meetings in the cluster communities, ensuring that the community members have their say in shaping the future projects.
- Heifer International Armenia Branch
  - Animal husbandry development initiative
  - Young farmers training project
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
  - Establishment of up-to-date veterinary points in the six villages of the cluster
  - Economic facilitation analysis in the prospective clusters
- UNDP and the Government of Italy
  - Infrastructural amendment and agricultural development initiatives in the Khashtarak cluster village of Lusadzor.

This list is by no means complete and will grow as the Program enlarges its scale to reach out to all the border villages. Overall, the Rural Development Program has been blessed by the strong support of both official structures and ordinary people who simply care and want to make a difference.

To maximally widen the opportunities of getting involved in the Program, we conceived the small projects initiative. These financially low-cost projects cannot solve major issues but can nevertheless have strong impact on the communities concerned, bringing hope and empowering people. We truly felt



the practical importance of these kinds of initiatives for the border community members when we visited six villages in the Program's Lori cluster to distribute school consumables to 208 students, as part of the small projects initiative. The project implementation date coincided with the approaching holidays and the children received the consumable packages as New Year gifts. We tried telling them otherwise, but in the end it all very much made sense.

This is a very interesting notion, as it shows just how much these children need that attention from the outside world, not only on New Year, or holiday, or any other special occasion, but everyday and always. Driving through the half empty villages through rocks, ice and mud and seeing the scale of work that needs to be done, you really understand the importance of this kind of additional incentive not only for the children but also men and women who live in these conditions day after day, everyday and have the



strength and the resolve to carry on. They truly deserve a better life and these kinds of projects give them the hope that help is on the way, that there is someone who cares and wants to help.



In this sense, 2008 promises to be a very interesting, intense and rewarding year as we will see many of the specific initiatives become a reality and improve life in the border villages whether it's on infrastructural, economic or social level. The measure of success here is that this time next year more families living in the border villages will decide not to travel abroad and stay in their villages as they will feel and see that change is coming and life is actually getting better. Of all the things, this would be our New Year wish and we hope that you will join us on this one. Happy New Year and Merry Christmas!!!

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