



հայաստան համահայկական հիմնադրամ
The Armenia Fund



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Rural Development Program

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FROM: RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION OFFICE
SUBJECT: WEEKLY UPDATE OF THE ARMENIA FUND RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

After a short holiday break, it's business as usual for The Armenia Fund Rural Development Program. This first report in the New Year concentrates on the Program's prospective cluster near Akhurian reservoir in Shirak region of Armenia. It also focuses on the developments in the library improvement project in the pilot Khashtarak cluster.

AKHURIAN PROSPECTIVE CLUSTER



On January 10, 2008, The Armenia Fund Executive Director Vahe Aghabegians and the Rural Development Program staff made a working visit to the communities near Akhurian reservoir in Shirak region (Jrapi, Isahakyan, Lusaaghbyur, Yerazgavors). The aim of the visit was to get the overall feel of the situation on the ground, see the cluster formation possibilities as well as hear

the community members' views on the most pressing issues in their villages.

With the temperature in all of Armenia dropping to (the very unusual) -20 to -25C and the roads frozen over, the 160+km road to Akhurian proved to be quite a testing experience. The roads were almost empty, as the motorized public transportation was almost completely absent in the region given the weather conditions. The one public transport, which in this weather is the communities' almost exclusive link to the outside world, is a Soviet era train, which comes complete with the old Empire's signature emblem, rusty carriages, delays and slow speed, making people wait for hours in the unheated stations.





On the way to Jrapi community, which is one of the villages on the bank of Akhurian reservoir and our first destination, we passed by an abandoned village. Nested in the middle of two small mountains it no longer had a name and its empty, broken down houses were a potent reminder of the urgency of the task at hand.

Jrapi is a village of around 1100 people. At this time of the year, the setting of the community changes drastically, as Akhurian reservoir is empty in wintertime. But even when it's full, it does not provide the communities of the region with easily reached irrigation water or dependable income. This is a border area between Armenia and Turkey, with the divisive line passing through the middle of the reservoir and the banks on both sides under strong control. Even to be able to fish in the waters of the reservoir, the community members need to get a special license, which places strict limitations on the number of fish that can be caught, making this kind of occupation little more than a hobby. Any endeavor of scale related with Akhurian reservoir needs to go through the scrutiny of a two state committee.

With the reservoir's resources almost out of the financial equation, the community members of Jrapi and other communities of the region concentrate on land based agriculture instead. The basic problem here is the total lack or the unsatisfactory state of the irrigation water networks. Much of the water for the communities comes from underground springs via wells going down as low as 125 meters. The pumps in place are out of date and expensive to exploit and maintain, thus the farmers rely on natural irrigation. This strongly reduces the amount of harvested crops and limits the range of cultivable produce. The lack of available water also makes it hard to expand the cattle breeding practice, as the water is scarce for the animals to drink, as simple as that.

In the community of Isahakyan, the water issue extends to drinking water as well. The single well that serves the whole village is too small and the community receives drinking water once in three days for only one hour. Our visit coincided with one of those days. At -20C degrees, there were clothes hanging outside. With the wind constantly blowing from one direction, the





wet clothes had frozen stiff bended at a bizarre angle, making a strong statement on the issue and underlining the fact that none of the communities have access to natural gas to heat their homes and at least dry their clothes inside. For the past fifteen years, these are the conditions people bear day after day, everyday.



In the community of Lusaghbyur, people tried to solve the water issue by digging individual wells. These wells are only used to irrigate a very small plot of land near the house and provide the family with drinking water. These kinds of conditions hinder the normal development of the farming households, limiting them to sustenance farming.

At the same time, the communities have the potential and capacity to develop feasible cattle breeding practice and improve agriculture. The key here is solving the universal access to markets issue. In this sense, the railroad that passes through all the communities can become a strong uniting factor and a lifeline for the communities. It can be used to re-establish the now severed trading links both within the communities and with the rest of the country. The area would also be suitable for establishing a milk collection unit, as most communities have 500-800 cows, which is an above average statistic for Armenia's border villages.



With the abundant snow not concealing but instead emphasizing the problems of the communities, it also underlined the determination of the community members' to carry on. All they ask for are the very basic conditions and an environment where they can help themselves, an environment we will do everything and anything possible to create

together.

LIBRARY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

After a period of research and preparations, the Azatamut community library improvement initiative is close to becoming a reality. With the process of acquiring the needed books now in progress, it is now time to focus on the renovation of the library space itself. Our approach here is guaranteeing



maximum participation and involvement of students and other community members in the renovation process.

This way, each and every member of the community involved will develop the sense of ownership and belonging. Even the youngest members of the community will have the opportunity to contribute as they will have a huge wall and a door to paint and let their imagination fly. All this is necessary to breathe a new life into a place, which in the last fifteen years has become little more than an annoying chore and a painfully dull extension to the school curriculum. This needs to change. They say that the change starts at heart; it sure is true for this project as despite the cold weather, the community is very eager to start the renovation process as soon as possible.

The Rural Development Program staff will visit the community early next week to discuss the details of the renovation process.