



հայաստան համահայկական հիմնադրամ
The Armenia Fund



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Rural Development Program

DATE: 16 November, 2007
FROM: RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION OFFICE
SUBJECT: WEEKLY UPDATE OF THE ARMENIA FUND RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The key events of this week included the organization of a series of community meetings in the Khashtarak cluster villages, where the members of the communities within the Program expressed their views on the overall development strategy for the cluster and a number of divisive issues. We also visited the cluster with businesswoman Shakeh Havan who is considering sponsoring a library upgrade project in the communities involved.

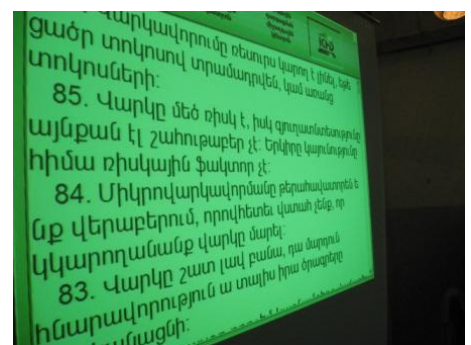
COMMUNITY MEETINGS



On November 10, 2007, International Center for Human Development (ICHD) experts accompanied by the Rural Development Program staff visited the Khashtarak cluster. The aim of the visit was to conduct community meetings in three of the six villages included in the pilot cluster (Azatamut, Khashtarak and Lusahovit).

The ICHD in cooperation with the Rural Development Program staff developed a total of six scenarios for the meetings. We tried to single out topics which covered a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from the concept of pilot cluster as an integrated development mechanism to the establishment of milk collection units and working out an adequate pricing strategy for the village produce.

The concept of the ICHD community meetings, as opposed to organization of lectures or seminars, is to create a favorable environment for an open discussion, where people can speak out freely on the issues that concern them and their community. Each village was represented by fifty community members. The age and gender of the participants was based





on to the village demographic data so as to create an accurate sample of the community. People then split into five groups each of which had its facilitator and note taker whose role was to guarantee the smooth flow of the discussion and register the thoughts and ideas expressed during the meetings. The key ideas would then be projected on the screens to allow all the groups to follow the course of the discussion.



As a conclusion for the discussions, the participants voted on the issues presented so as to represent the overall stance of the community on each separate matter. One of the voting themes was the pros and cons of being a pilot cluster whereby the communities are the first to enjoy the benefits of the program. At the same time, because the program is yet to polish the mechanism of parallel economic and infrastructural development, not all the projects may go as planned. This is a learning experience and includes many pitfalls and unforeseen complications. Another issue was the centralization concept, whereby certain infrastructure components will be shared by all the communities within the cluster. This includes the establishment of a cluster school, community center and health care point.

The centralization will enable us to focus the resources on creating truly modern establishments which, quality wise do not have precedents in the border communities. The main challenge here is the overall mindset of people who, because of a long history of disappointments, are suspicious of any change. Other topics for the voting were to understand the participants' stance on micro financing, developing trading links in the market economy environment and the establishment of a milk collection unit. The overall mood of the community members was very positive and supportive.

LIBRARY PROJECT



On November 12, 2007, Shakeh Havan accompanied by the Rural Development Program staff visited the Khashtarak cluster villages. Ms. Havan is considering sponsoring a library conditions improvement project for the cluster villages. The aim of the visit was to define the initial benefactor communities of the initiative.

First stop of the visit was the village of Azatamut. Once a thriving industrial center, it is now home to about two thousand jobless people. The factory they all worked in was shut down in the turmoil of war and the transition period



that Armenia was going through in the 90s'. The overall education level in the community is higher than in the adjacent villages, as many of the community members are qualified specialists and technical support staff. All these criteria make Azatamut a suitable place for a pilot library which would work towards diversifying the otherwise monotonous social life of the community members.

In the present, none of the libraries in the Khashtarak cluster villages receive new literature or newspapers. The existing literature stock is comprised of Soviet propaganda material, very limited amount of fiction and non fiction books. There is almost no literature on agricultural or technical topics. The transfer of administrative power over the communal libraries from the regional library centers to the community administration body has severed the existing links with the other libraries and brought forward isolation. The financing that libraries currently receive is not enough to maintain even the present state of affairs. The libraries are kept alive only thanks to the efforts of dedicated staff.



If agreed on, the project in Azatamut will include renovation of the library, donation of furniture and books. In the frames of the project we will also negotiate with Haymamul, Armenia's newspaper distribution body, for Azatamut and the other villages to start receiving newspapers on regular basis.

The end result of the project will see a creation of a sustainable chain of communal libraries. The libraries in the chain would cooperate in acquiring new literature and equipment. The project also aims at increasing social interaction between the cluster villages by supporting the organization of joint events and a variety of specialized workshops both for the community members and librarians themselves.

As a follow up, the Rural Development Program staff will meet Ms. Havan to work out the details of the project. We will also try to mobilize the resources in the communities concerned, to ensure their active participation in the project. We are interested in involving students and kids, who are the primary beneficiaries of the initiative in all the stages of project implementation.