Imagine a village with a new school, but no paved roads for children to reach it. Imagine another school with paved roads, but no library, supplies or internet to stay competitive.

Imagine another village with irrigation water for its farms, but no drinking water for its farmers. Or a village with access to natural gas, but no pipelines to deliver it to homes and schools for heating.

For over 16 years, Armenia Fund has tackled a whole range of infrastructure initiatives.

One valuable lesson learned from this long journey is that even the most ambitious infrastructure restoration project implemented alone, may be a momentary remedy only, a short-term relief that will cure the symptoms but not the root of the problem.

continued Page 2...
This means that renovating just one road or rebuilding only a school will not bring the fundamental and lasting change that every village in Armenia needs.

With the launch of the Armenia Fund Rural Development Program, we embarked on a daring quest to tackle poverty and turn the dangerous tide of emigration from the vitally important border regions of Armenia and Artsakh by meeting infrastructure needs comprehensively and responsibly.

Our Cluster Approach

The time had come for a new vision, a new approach to the development strategy. This approach will group tiny and scarcely populated villages into development clusters that will widen the impact and diversify the spectrum of Armenia Fund activities.

Apart from the necessary infrastructure upgrade, we will also tackle the economic development in the border communities. The impact of creating jobs or providing updated agricultural techniques will thus go beyond the limits of one community and instead bring change to several communities at once. The cluster approach has proven to become a valuable method to save costs and capitalize on the competitive advantage of each village.

The villages will be grouped into clusters based on a number of criteria: their geographic vicinity, common infrastructure needs and their economic potential. This would ensure a more comprehensive and responsible development strategy.

Providing upgraded agricultural technologies to clusters of villages has been an essential part of the Rural Development Program.
Dear Friends,

I am pleased to update you with progress on our projects. In 2008, we allocated over $15 million for projects in the most underserved and remote areas of Armenia and Karabakh. With your help, rural families gained access to agricultural equipment, renovated and furnished classrooms, clean water and new healthcare units.

We are proud of our recent accomplishments, yet know that our mission is far from complete. In times like these, in the midst of a global recession, Armenia Fund offers a practical strategy that prepares subsistence farmers to improve lives of their families and, at the same time, rebuild Armenia’s rural economy. Now more than ever, “equipping” people with the necessary tools is the right idea at the right time.

We would like to express our gratitude for your part in helping the Fund bring the Armenian Dream to as many communities as possible. We look forward to working with you in the coming year and beyond, as we help rural families find their individual pathways to prosperity.

Irina Lazarian

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Armenia Fund’s first experience in using this approach is the Rural Development Program pilot cluster that embraces six border communities in Tavush region—Aknaghbyur, Azatamut, Ditavan, Lusadzor, Lusahovit and Khashtarak. While preserving their social autonomy and distinct features, these communities will function as a single economic mechanism. By creating this fabric of cooperation we will enable people to work together and coordinate their efforts in agriculture for more feasible results and a higher income.

An example of such coordinated effort is the establishment of a milk collection unit in the village of Azatamut that will serve the needs of all the communities included in the cluster.

Armenia Fund will use the same approach while addressing the infrastructure issues in the cluster villages. This way, instead of creating a separate healthcare point for each community, we will work on creating one fully functional and equipped facility that will use ambulances to effectively cover the whole territory of the cluster and provide quality treatment to all the people living in the six border communities.

The cluster approach works incredibly well with schools. Instead of time and resource-consuming renovation of every half-empty school in every village, we will focus our efforts on creating one centralized educational center that would provide the students with the best possible education in the best possible conditions.

The school buses will ensure the transportation of the children from all the nearby villages. This project is not about closing other schools; it is, however, about giving people a viable alternative, a chance for their children to get the education they deserve today to benefit their village tomorrow.

Overall, we believe that this new approach will ensure comprehensive development both in the clusters as a whole and in each separate community, reaching out to every family living in a border village. The creation of jobs and new economic possibilities in these communities will also ensure the maintenance and the sustainability of the implemented initiatives, and in the long run, will help establish the internal capacity to tackle the various issues in the community without outside help. Cluster village approach to development has proven to be an innovative tool to tackle poverty and bring long-lasting fundamental change for so many families that await help.

www.ArmeniaFundUSA.org
A child runs by clutching a bright blue plastic bottle. He is followed by a woman slowly walking with a bucket in each hand and a man with a weathered face that urges on a donkey carrying water jars. While standing in line for water, women share news and village gossip. These images cannot be attributed to one specific place as they are very common both in Armenia and Karabakh.

Water is the most basic element of life, and there certainly is no shortage of water neither in Armenia nor Karabakh. The freshwater springs are aplenty: uninterrupted and free, they pave their own paths around towns and cities and eventually end their journey in rivers and lakes. “The real challenge here is not the absence of water—the real challenge is finding a way of bringing the water from mountains and forest springs to people’s homes,” says Alexander Baghdasarian from Hadrut who solved his water issue by digging a well in his yard. Alexander says that digging wells cannot be a universal solution as it requires extensive work and resources. “We have a spring nearby called Bear Spring that flows steadily into nowhere. If we could get that water to the people of Hadrut, it would significantly relieve the current water situation,” Alexander said these words two years ago when the Hadrut water supply project was still in the design stage.

In 2007, the Armenia Fund launched the construction of the a 22km pipeline that would bring water from Bear Spring to the region of Hadrut as part of the Fund’s Rural Development Program. “The best part of it that all you need to do here is place the pipes. The natural elevation of the spring ensures that the people of Hadrut have uninterrupted access to water via the gravity flow, says Alexander.

Parallel to the implementation of this initiative, the Fund took up the task of renovating the town’s water reservoir and restoring the dilapidated well and pumping networks. All this will ensure that the 10,000 people living in Hadrut will never have to stand in a water line again and the images of people carrying buckets of water will become a distant memory.
Mikhail Shraga
Sheepshead Bay, NY
May 15, 2009

I choose to help through Armenia Fund USA because I believe in their diligent approach to putting Armenia back on its feet.

Their carefully planned projects are focused on long-term development. The goal is to not only provide immediate help but to lay the foundations that rural areas in Karabakh and Armenia need in order to blossom as strong functional communities.

I am not Armenian myself but have always had great respect for Armenia and its culture. Throughout its long history, Armenian people have made endless significant contributions to the world’s arts, sciences and technologies.

Today, while Armenians are scattered around the world, they continue to play an integral part in its development. The Armenians I am privileged to know are very charismatic, bright and talented individuals.

I would like to do everything on my part to help give all those living in their homeland the opportunity to thrive and explore their true potential. As a contributor to this cause, I am always confident that Armenia Fund USA directs my efforts where they are most effective.

Mikhail Shraga
Sheepshead Bay, NY