

Inspiring Citizens, Improving Communities

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES FROM A
COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM IN ARMENIA



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SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES FROM A
COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM IN ARMENIA



2008

Nicholas J. Bruno



Center for Enterprise
and Capacity Development



PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES

Youth Action Clubs

Aragatsotn Region
Aparan town
Ashnak village
Davtashen village

Ararat Region
Surenavan village
Araksavan village
Aygepat village
Vosketap village
Mkhchyan village

Armavir Region
Karakert village
Tsiatsan village
Aragats village
Ptghunk village

Gegharkunik Region
Ltchashen village
Lanjaghbyur village
Martuni village

Kotayk Region
Nor Geghi village
Ptghni village
Aramus village

Lori Region
Lejan village
Vahagni village
Dsegh village

Shirak Region
Sarnaghbyur village
Akhuryan village
Kamo village
Keti village

Syunik Region
Gorayk village
Khnatsakh village
Sarnakunk village
Brnakot village

Tavush Region
Noyemberyan town
Dilijan town
Voskevan village
Berdavan village

Vayots Dzor Region
Aghavnadzor village
Artabuynk village
Herher village
Getap village

Community Action Committees

Aragatsotn Region
Aragats village
Garnahovit village
Aragatsavan village
Souser village
Karmrashen village

Ararat Region
Ranchpar village
Nor Kharberd village
Urtsadzor village

Armavir Region
Haytagh village
Voskehat village
Parakar village
Lukashin village

Gegharkunik Region
Tchambarak town
Tsovazard village
Tsovagyugh village
Vardenik village
Litchk village

Kotayk Region
Yeghvard town
Kotayk village
Verin Ptghni village
Zovashen village
Meghradzor village

Lori Region
Akhtala town
Margahovit village
Gargar village
Odzun village
Marts village

Shirak Region
Nor Kyank village
Haykadzor village
Meghrashen village
Bavra village

Syunik Region
Ashotavan village
Artsvanik village
Spandaryan village
Verin Khotanan village

Tavush Region
Berd town
Koti village
Aygehovit village
Ganzakar village

Vayots Dzor Region
Areni village
Gomk village
Agarakadzor village
Bardzruni village



INTRODUCTION

The five-year Armenia Youth and Community Action Program (YCAP) was initiated at a time when Armenia faced mixed progress in its transition toward democratic governance. Authoritarian traditions and institutions are remaining legacies that hinder civic engagement. At the same time, the country's population is in decline and high unemployment causes young people to leave villages for urban areas or migrate to other countries for work. Youth and adults care deeply about their communities and would rather not leave, but many are discouraged that they do not have the means to participate in developing their village or town and by extension, their country. YCAP was conceived to provide the means for them to do so. This publication describes how YCAP has made a difference in Armenia's future and provides lessons on how to effectively stimulate citizen engagement elsewhere, with particular focus on youth.

The progress of communities that have participated in YCAP over the past four years has been quite remarkable. To date, there are over 1,500 people living in 80 villages participating in YCAP who have had an impact on the lives of 250,000 residents throughout Armenia. They have conceived, planned, and carried out over 2,000 civic activities that have addressed a range of community issues: environment, water management, waste management, youth development, education, sports, agriculture, local budgeting, women's issues, health, public transportation, cultural

life, infrastructure, and others. YCAP has shown that given a little technical support, a modicum of financial resources, and the freedom to decide what is important to them, regular citizens can make a significant impact on their community's development.

This is a story of what people have accomplished and how they accomplished it. It is a story about tapping into people's energies and helping them to develop an environment in which they can exercise their creativity for the betterment of their society. The methodologies and approaches used to implement YCAP can be replicated anywhere. However, these tools are only effective if citizens use them to invigorate the pent up energy and creativity of their fellow community members, while encouraging each other despite roadblocks and, at times, feeling that they might fail. As with any program, it is this human element that is the key to YCAP's success. It is through these people that YCAP's story is told, why they became involved, and why YCAP works.

¹ YCAP is a program funded by USAID under a Cooperative Agreement to AED.

² ARD, Inc., Democracy and Governance Assessment of Armenia, June 2002, p. 2.

BACKGROUND

Armenia has made modest progress in developing civil society and democratic government, with many of the efforts supported by donor activities. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector has become more robust and local governments, parliament, and the judicial system have been strengthened. Additional support to encourage civic engagement, develop independent and more effective media, and build stronger advocacy NGOs has been needed to sustain this progress.

Civic activism, though not an entirely new concept in Armenia, was and is still developing. AED addressed this with the Youth and Community Action Program (YCAP) in two ways: by increasing support for civic activism among young men and women and by fostering greater community involvement by all citizens for addressing public issues.

Transformation of any society is in part carried out by successive generations in which youth are critical future leaders and catalysts for change. In Armenia, youth outside of the capital city of Yerevan have little exposure or opportunity to engage in formal leadership and community development activities. Many young people leave school at the age of 16. Thus, there is a period when they have little to do but wonder

what kind of future they will have. For these reasons, and to increase civic activism among young men and women, the program targeted rural youth ages 14–25 to make them aware of their rights and responsibilities in a democracy, increase their activism and involvement in community decision-making processes, establish concrete mechanisms and models to help them see how they can effect change, and increase their political participation and influence in society with particular focus on young women.

In these same communities, older citizens demonstrated great interest in laws and regulations affecting them and their community's development. Under prior donor-funded activities, they had been encouraged to participate in budget hearings and town hall meetings, express their views



on inequitable practices or rallied to protest decisions affecting the community for which they had no opportunity for input. These programs also introduced them to the notion of volunteerism and its value. Building on these efforts, AED designed YCAP to further these achievements by establishing concrete mechanisms for citizen input at the local level, increasing the capacity of citizen groups to address public issues, increasing grassroots activism in communities throughout Armenia, and promoting civil society advocacy leading to increasing pluralism in Armenia.

In small towns and villages throughout Armenia, people young and old want to improve their condition and their communities. They have ideas but often do not recognize they have the means. This is where YCAP's story begins.

ARMENIA

- Marz Coordinator Offices
- Youth Action Clubs
- Community Action Committees

Population: 3,033,000

Capital: Yerevan

Area: 29,743 square km (11,484 square miles)

Languages: Armenian, Russian

Religion: Armenian Apostolic

GDP per Capita: U.S. \$3,600

Successful Practices for Establishing Community Action Groups

By December 2008, over 1,500 people have participated in YCAP's youth action clubs (YACs) or community action committees (CACs) through the over 2,000 activities they have conceived, planned, and implemented themselves and that have affected the lives of 250,000 people. Their remarkable progress proves that given a little technical support and the freedom to decide what is important to act upon, regular citizens, both youth and adult, can make a significant impact on their community's development.

A number of practices emerged that have been key approaches to YCAP's success:

Foster an enabling environment where creativity and new ideas can flourish.

There is no one "right" way of doing this except to develop a space where people committed to action are encouraged to talk openly about their ideas to others who will actively listen and then share their ideas. The participants will take it from there.

Keep "rules" for organizing people simple and emphasize self-determination.

Use the democratic principles of fairness, transparency, and collaborative decision making. The manner in which they conduct their affairs using these principles, for the most part, should be left up to them. Give staff members two simple rules: 1) Be creative within the framework of the program and 2) Don't do the community's work.



Grassroots Civic Activism Study Tour to Ukraine for YAC members



DILIJAN YAC MEMBERS

Young Dilijan monthly community newsletter initiated and prepared by Dilijan YAC members

Involve the right people.

This is true of two important types of players: the staff members who work with the communities and the community members who choose to volunteer. Staff members should require community residents to tap into their own creative energy and to continue even when they feel they are not getting anywhere. Volunteers should be willing to participate for the good of the community, knowing that there is no personal financial gain. In both cases, the people working with the program need to be excited and committed.

Provide a small amount of support in the form of training and coaching.

Inspire and support group development and project implementation through special civic education programs for youth, international study tours, and annual national conferences to bring people together to share ideas and information, create networks, and facilitate collaboration.

Ensure groups find a neutral place to meet.

Civic groups need a place they can call their own, whether it is in a school or a business or other publicly accessible space. Whoever donates the space or gives permission for its use should be a strong supporter of the group.

Guide the groups to decide on their own leadership structure.

Let them work out how they will make decisions. Going back to keeping simple rules, assure that the process is fair, transparent, and that everyone has a say. People generally gravitate toward consensus-style decision making, which should be encouraged and supported.

Begin with an assessment.

Encourage the groups to conduct their own surveys that canvass the entire community. This can be done through door-to-door interviews, suggestion boxes placed around the community, or other mechanisms for determining needs and issues important to the community.



KOTAYK CAC MEMBERS

Seminar on “Child Health and Childhood Disease Prevention” organized by Kotayk CAC for young mothers and other community members

Prepare an action plan.

Help groups set clear goals and objectives and assure that people volunteer to take responsibility for actions in the plan.

Involve all stakeholders in resolving the issues.

Seek to understand all sides of the issue. Sometimes resolution of one issue causes another problem because not all people affected by the first issue were involved in the process.

Use the resources at hand to develop interim solutions.

When a solution to a problem is going to take time, encourage the groups to organize an interim solution to bridge the gap so as not to lose momentum.

Get information out to the entire community.

Distributing community newsletters, organizing annual presentations, and conducting special community events are a few ways in which a group can keep community residents abreast of their activities. These types of activities can also inspire new people to become involved.

Encourage groups to start with less complex issues.

Civic groups may have more success tackling less complex issues first. This will build skills and confidence. Tackle bigger issues later.

Gain local government support first.

Many issues can be solved locally, so work with local government first. Progress to the regional or national levels later if needed. Upper levels of government often want evidence of local support before getting involved.

Access key public information.

Acquiring public information, such as municipal budgets and laws governing public services, helps clubs solve problems. If a freedom of information law exists, then assure that the civic groups know about it and how to use it to their advantage.

Expose youth to different programs, methodologies, and ideas.

Youth are natural change agents and will take new ideas back to their communities and will apply and share what they have learned.

Use mass media effectively.

Highlighting an issue through the mass media can enhance a project’s chance of success and engage a broader base of support.

All of these helped YAC and CAC members to gain the essential skills, knowledge, and experience that they apply in their communities. Though not a best practice per say, the enthusiasm and support for the communities shown by the local staff members was essential. Without their caring attitudes and commitment to the communities, YCAP approach would not have been successful.



ARAGATS CAC MEMBERS

Aragatsavan CAC members repair a water pipe



THE POWER OF ORGANIZING


YOUTH IN ACTION

AKHURYAN VILLAGE

Akhuryan village established a 25-member youth action club with interests in five sectors (education, health, social, sports, and technical), and undertook over 20 projects in two-and-a-half years. For their leadership structure, they chose an executive body made up of an elected president, vice president, secretary, and sector chairpersons who carry out all of the organizational aspects of the club. Most decisions are made by vote of the membership or by the executive body, depending on the level of the decision. Regardless of who makes the final decision, all sides of an issue are thoroughly discussed and debated among the members until decisions are reached by near consensus.

Though a separate municipality, Akhuryan could be considered a suburb of the city of

Gyumri, located in the northwestern region of Shirak. Founded in 1828, it now has about 11,000 residents, and is divided into three districts. Akhuryan was well developed with apartment buildings, a hospital and polyclinic, schools, kindergartens, a cultural center and church, and factories, but all of these structures were destroyed by the 1988 earthquake during which more than 25,000 people from Gyumri and surrounding communities died. Like many other villages and towns affected by the earthquake, Akhuryan has remnants of half-ruined or half-built structures that render it aesthetically unpleasing and remind people of the earthquake. Since then, the village has been slowly rebuilding. It now has five schools, a cultural center, a few industries, and a mother and child health center, which also serves Gyumri. After the earthquake, and later the



GUIDE THE PROGRAM SO THAT CLUBS DECIDE ON THEIR OWN LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS.



collapse of the Soviet Union, the village's main employment became agriculture, animal husbandry and herding, chicken farms, and honey production. Establishing the YAC has helped provide a focus for organizing projects to improve the community.

VISITS TO ORPHANAGES. One of the YAC's first actions was a clothes and toys drive for the children of the Gyumri Orphanage. The YAC distributed the donated items and spent a day with the children, playing games and

singing songs. YAC members visit the orphanage regularly now, which helps the children feel that they are not forgotten by society. They play and socialize with the children and bring them small gifts of clothes, toys, and sweets. The most important thing the YAC brought, according to feedback from the children, was their warm attitude and attention. Until YCAP partnered with the Akhuryan youth, the village had never experienced the social value of an active youth group.



AKHURYAN YAC MEMBERS

Akhuryan YAC members' visit to Gyumri Orphanage

SEMINARS. The Akhuryan YAC youth are always looking for ways to share what they learn. They have organized several seminars for the youth of the community, starting with *Gender Equality and Gender Stereotypes*. They invited the director of the Shirak Region branch of the Women with University Education NGO to deliver the seminar and facilitate discussions. This seminar generated much interest among the participants, and led them to reconsider gender roles, in particular the role of women in society and recognition of women's rights. The female participants admitted that they had never fully taken the responsibility to fight for their rights. The seminar inspired them to break current stereotypes by protecting women's rights and promoting their active participation in all spheres of life.

DEBATES, DEBATES, DEBATES. The YAC president attended the YCAP 2006 Yerevan in 5 Days program, where he learned debate methods and techniques. Inspired by what he learned, he organized a seminar for the Akhuryan YAC on *How to Organize a Debate*. After explaining debate principles and methods, he asked the participants to come up with a debate topic. After ten minutes of brainstorming the group chose the topic: *The Death Penalty or Life Imprisonment*. They split into two groups and used their new knowledge to engage in a lively debate. The side debating for life imprisonment won.

The youth were so enthusiastic about debating that they organized another seminar for the upper level students at one of the

schools. The YAC facilitators prepared and distributed handouts and other informational materials. By the end of the seminar, the participants were confident in their debating skills and decided to organize a debate on the topic, *Should Army Service be Mandatory for Men?* Both sides debated well, resulting in a draw. This turned out to be a

popular topic whenever the YAC took their debate seminar to other communities.

During the debate seminar for a new club in Kamo village, the Akhuryan youth shared their knowledge with their peers, gave presentations on how to debate, construct

arguments, and develop skills required

for debating. The YAC proposed that the Kamo youth practice by having a real debate. They proposed the army service topic, this time as *Mandatory or Contractual Army Service*. Using well-constructed and convincing arguments on both sides, again the debate ended in a draw, but the primary winner was the Kamo YAC. The debate demonstrated that the seminar had been effective, and young people from Kamo are now well prepared for holding debates—a key skill for civic activism.

COLLABORATION. After participating in a training of trainers course organized by the Armenian Human Rights Protection Center NGO, the Akhuryan YAC vice president, two Kamo YAC members, and a Sarnaghbyur YAC member organized and conducted a seminar on the *Role of Youth in Environmental Protection* held in Kamo village. Since the group believed there were more environmental problems in Kamo than in the other two communities,



EXPOSE YOUTH TO DIFFERENT PROGRAMS, METHODOLOGIES, AND IDEAS THAT THEY CAN TAKE BACK TO THEIR COMMUNITIES. YOUTH ARE ACTIVE IN APPLYING AND SHARING WHAT THEY LEARN.



“There is an interesting psychological nuance – when you care for your community and try to be useful for it, the community becomes ‘yours’ and you become more attached to it. Fostering this feeling is especially important for our community, as our young people very often think of leaving the community to find a job elsewhere”

- NUNE MIRZOYAN, MARTUNI YAC MEMBER (GEGHARKUNIK REGION)

they felt that youth should be more aware of the importance of environmental protection and should be urged to take action.

The Kamo YAC and other young people from the community received information on environmentalism, participated in group work, watched a documentary film, discussed environmental problems in their community, and developed an action plan. The first items in the action plan were organizing garbage removal, cleaning up and improving the village monument, and organizing a tree planting in the village.

The Akhuryan and Sarnaghbyur YACs discovered that they could achieve more by working together. They decided to continue to cooperate so they could be the driving force for addressing the environmental problems in Shirak region.

PASSING ON KNOWLEDGE. Perhaps the most ambitious activity the club undertook was the program, *Three Days at Akhuryan YAC*, for the youth of their community who wanted to know more about the YAC’s activities and about civic activism, democracy, human

rights, volunteerism, youth policy, and other concepts underpinning the YAC’s actions. The idea came from one of the members who participated in the 2007 *Yerevan in 5 Days* program. To fund the project, the YAC applied to the Youth Engaging Society Grant program from the Flex Alumni Association and received 89,700 AMD (~\$265 US).

The three-day training program taught young people about citizenship and civic rights, democracy, human rights, cultural education, non-formal education, involving young people in the public services and volunteer work, youth state policy, gender discrimination, and other subjects. As a result of the program, 20 more young people are engaged with community problem solving. As their first initiative, they are working to create a Youth Cultural and Recreational Center in the community.

The ideas, enthusiasm, and caring that these youth show are mirrored in all of the other YCAP youth clubs’ civic actions.




THE POWER OF ORGANIZING

A COMMUNITY IN ACTION

TCHAMBARAK TOWN

Tchambarak town established their CAC in September 2005. With 23 members (11 men, 12 women) and five subcommittees (education, social/health, civic advocacy, public relation, and sports), they have carried out over 50 projects and seminars in the last three years. They chose a leadership structure of an elected president and elected subcommittee chairpersons. These six people make up the executive body and are responsible for all organizational issues. The members form the general council and decision making occurs by an open floor voting process. The executive body brings topics to general meetings that are thoroughly discussed and debated among the members, in many cases resulting in a consensus. Members have the right to bring up topics for discussion at general meetings as well.

Tchambarak has a population of about 7,700 residents, four schools, one kindergarten, an art and music school, polyclinic, hospital, and a milk processing factory. It is an agrarian community, with the primary occupations of animal husbandry, small-scale agriculture, and apiculture.



ACCESS TO KEY PUBLIC INFORMATION, SUCH AS MUNICIPAL BUDGETS, HELPS CLUBS SOLVE PROBLEMS.

BUDGET. The CAC set out to establish a transparent budget process in the community. By Armenian law,

the community budget and budget process are public information. The

CAC learned that not only were the residents in the dark about community budget allocations and spending, so were some of the Town Council members. The CAC decided not only to find ways to encourage Town Council members to stay better informed on the budget, but also to regularly inform community residents about

the budget income, expenses, and the budget process.

To achieve this, the CAC applied to the municipal finance department and received detailed budget information, developed a leaflet based on this information, and posted copies in places frequented by town residents. The goal was to ensure a transparent municipal budget process to spur citizens to pay taxes and participate in discussing community issues and identifying priorities for budget allocations.

In early 2006, the CAC held a meeting in which the municipal finance officer presented the Tchambarak community budget to town residents. They discussed budget formation, how the budget revenues and expenses were determined, the requirements for making the budget available to the public according to Armenian Law, and how the community could suggest changes in the budget.

Maintaining the momentum and interest of the community, the CAC invited a representative from the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (FOICA, <http://www.foi.am/en/>) to give a presentation on the Law on Freedom of Information. Residents learned how to apply to state and local governments and budgetary organizations to request information. The presentation emphasized the mandated time frames for receiving answers and how to respond to refusals to provide information.

Since the Tchambarak CAC's founding in September 2005, the members have

regularly informed community residents on the income and expenses of the municipal budget. The CAC believed that making the information available to the community would increase the local government's accountability to residents. This would create an atmosphere of mutual trust that they hoped would result in close

collaboration between the local government and the community residents—and it seems to be working. More residents have become active in

discussions on how tax revenue is spent in the community. Local taxes make up 30 percent of the municipal budget, and submission rates have steadily increased over the past two years. The CAC has been directly involved in this by organizing tax collection drives equaling four percent of the required amount.

WATER. Improving the quality of the community drinking water supply was a primary concern for many Tchambarak residents. Broken pipes caused the water to become contaminated. Water mains were only opened every two to three days to prevent too much loss. To address this issue, the CAC members called a meeting with the director of the Tchambarak Branch of the Armenian Water and Sewerage Company (AWSC). The director explained the situation to them clearly: in addition to broken pipes, the water was stored in open reservoirs and the filtration system did not work, and therefore water was not purified properly. The AWSC Branch did not have the budget resources to fix such a large undertaking. They could barely pay employee salaries and had no money for technical repairs and upgrades.



GAIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT
FIRST. UPPER LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT
OFTEN WANT PROOF OF LOCAL SUPPORT.



Presented with this information, the CAC members went to the mass media. They discussed the problem on national radio and sent press releases to Armenpress and Noyan Tapan information agencies—large news distribution services. The CAC sent a letter to the director of AWSC Yerevan office requesting that he address this issue and take necessary steps to improve water quality and delivery. To bring additional attention to the issue, they sent a letter to the governor of the Gegharkunik Region.

Several months passed and by the end of September 2006, the CAC had not received any responses on this issue. They decided to persevere and in October 2006 raised the issue of the water problem during a live broadcast interview with the Gegharkunik governor on the Gavar regional TV station.

Following the interview, the governor promised to send experts to Tchambarak to conduct a survey on the drinking water quality and after that, if needed, to bring the issue to the appropriate organizations and government bodies. True to his word, the governor formed a committee of specialists from the Gegharkunik Regional Municipality, AWSC, Tchambarak Municipality, and the Tchambarak CAC to assess the situation on the ground. The committee found serious problems and agreed that urgent measures should be taken. They sent water samples to the AWSC laboratories and to the National Hygienic and Epidemiological Center.

Based on the laboratory results, the governor sent the CAC an official letter informing them that their water problems were caused by the

poor technical condition of the drinking water's internal system (which they already knew), but more importantly, that the AWSC planned to include the renovation of Tchambarak's drinking water system in their 2007 project list. Unfortunately, this project did not make the AWSC's project list in 2007 or in 2008. The reason—budget constraints.

The CAC's efforts were not in vain, however. Through their six-month effort, they brought high-level attention to this issue and even though they do not have a new system, they do have an improved system. The local AWSC office sent technicians to repair the broken pipes, which mitigated contamination from rain and runoff water, and now the water company responds immediately to repair new breaks in the system. The water quality has improved.

Another year has gone by and Tchambarak still needs an entirely new water supply system. The CAC and community residents are keeping this issue in the spotlight. They are determined to succeed.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING. To get residents more involved in community issues, the CAC Information Subcommittee organized an exhibit titled, *Problems of Tchambarak Community in Photos*. Five local photographers submitted 22 photos each, showing problems in the community, such as littering and waste management, vandalism of public property, issues effecting the elderly, drinking water infrastructure, poor road conditions, and dilapidated sports facilities. The exhibit was held in Tchambarak secondary schools to draw the attention of school students to



EFFECTIVE USE OF
MASS MEDIA CAN
ENHANCE A PROJECT'S
CHANCE OF SUCCESS.



“The [YCAP] program provided us with opportunities to participate in various seminars, trainings, and study tours, which helped us to enrich our knowledge and develop new skills, and all that resulted in our increased self-consciousness and self-determination.”

- ARPINE MATINYAN, MARGAHOVIT CAC MEMBER (LORI REGION)

community problems, and to generate interest and active participation, not only to resolve problems, but also to prevent the causes.

The exhibit attracted about 700 people, including teachers and students from Tchambarak’s four high schools. This activity helped the CAC and students to develop community projects. The students decided to visit elderly residents who were without family, to help them with household chores and to give them more social contact. They also assisted in a town litter clean-up. Through the photo exhibit, the CAC introduced community service to the town’s youth, thus growing a new generation of volunteers and concerned citizens.

Prospects for Tchambarak’s Economic Development: Are there any prospects, and what are they? was the topic of a debate organized by the CAC. They engaged and challenged residents to debate the possibilities for Tchambarak’s economic development. The pessimists argued a lack of natural resources in the village—almost no land suitable for cultivation or growing produce and no mineral or other natural resources to help economic development. The optimists argued that developed nations do not only depend on

existing natural resources for wealth and economic development but also have the ability to self-organize and use their human resources. This core strategy succeeded in convincing their opponents that possibilities for economic development do exist. To succeed, however, the community would need to promote people’s initiatives and urge the government to invest more in building human capacity. The participants found the debate very interesting and stimulating, and were motivated to create new initiatives to develop their community.

One initiative was to collaborate with microenterprise development NGOs to further assess Tchambarak’s potential for rural economic development projects in agriculture, cottage industry, and tourism.

These types of activities mark a healthy, engaged citizenry. Despite all the challenges, the Tchambarak CAC has established a leadership role in the community through open dialogue, innovative engagement with residents and government, persistence, commitment, and the belief that regular citizens can make a significant difference and contribute to society for the benefit of all.



PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF.



IMPROVING COMMUNITIES

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

TRANSPORTATION

One of the overarching issues for many of the communities in Armenia has been inadequate or a complete lack of public transportation. This affects nearly the whole community, from university students who go to class in another city to people who travel to the regional capital for business or other activities. Several communities took up this issue and approached it in different ways.

Tchambarak town, located in the mountains of northeast Armenia in the Gegharkunik region, established its community action committee in September 2005. One of the CAC's first actions was to develop a community survey to identify priority issues. The need to open a public transportation route to the region's capital city of Gavar, about 55 miles away, was one

of the issues that emerged. The regional municipal offices are located there, along with a university. This may not seem like a great distance, but because there was no direct transportation route or service, getting there and back was an all-day ordeal. Tchambarak residents had to walk or catch a ride the nine-and-a-half miles to reach the main road and then flag down cars or buses. This often resulted in long waits, and through the long winters, in cold and inclement weather.

BEGIN WITH AN ASSESSMENT,
WHICH MAY INCLUDE A SURVEY,
TO DETERMINE NEEDS AND ISSUES
IMPORTANT TO THE COMMUNITY.

The CAC arranged a meeting with the director of the Gegharkunik Regional Department of Transportation (GDOT), several minivan and bus owners in Tchambarak, and community members. The CAC president presented survey results showing the demand for a direct route to Gavar. He cited Gavar's position as the regional capital and

that many people from Tchambarak and neighboring areas have businesses and personal matters to conduct there every day. In addition, many students from the town and neighboring areas study at the university in Gavar and the headquarters of many organizations are located in Sevan, a city along the proposed route. The CAC was able to show a clear need for a Tchambarak-Gavar-Tchambarak route. The GDOT approved the action and issued licenses to open the new route. With this success, the CAC felt confident to address other issues, described later in Tchambarak's profile.



Tchambarak-Sevan-Gavar bus route opened as a result of the successful campaign organized by the Tchambarak CAC

Inspired by the success of the Tchambarak CAC, the Dilijan YAC assessed their municipal transportation system for areas that needed improvement. Their mid-size town in Tavush Region has several residential districts. The YAC found that there was no regular public transportation connecting the Golovino District with the town's other districts. This problem was about to become more acute with the coming of the new academic year in September.

The YAC developed a Dilijan Public Transportation Improvement Program and arranged a presentation for the deputy mayor, Town Council, and the local mini-bus owners. The presentation generated a lively

PREPARE AN ACTION PLAN.



discussion during which the Town Council agreed to open a regular transportation route and schedule for Golovino. Because of the youth's efforts, the district's residents now enjoy a properly working public transportation system. Their initiative has helped to solve related problems, including poor school attendance. This initiative demonstrated how the power of organizing and peer-to-peer networking can influence civic initiatives in other communities.

The mayor and some community residents of Araksavan village in Ararat Region thought that the transportation problem could not be solved. For years, residents had to walk about two miles to reach the main road to catch a bus to Yerevan, Armenia's capital city. Most affected were the university students, many of whom travel daily to Yerevan. As an interim solution, the YAC found a local resident with a minivan who agreed to make his services available for a nominal fee. Meanwhile the YAC continued to work on establishing an official Yerevan-Araksavan route. This issue became more urgent with the beginning of the 2007 academic year. More students were attending university, and after walking the two miles to the highway, they often found the mini-buses already full. There was no official bus stop at the intersection of the village road and the highway, which created safety issues, especially for young women.

The YAC applied to the Ararat Regional Department of Transportation (ADOT), requesting a new transportation line. They also sent a letter to the Minister of Territorial Administration, describing the situation and requesting support to solve this pressing

problem. The ADOT sent representatives to visit the community and meet with the YAC and community representatives. As a result, ADOT allocated a mini-bus for Araksavan students, which has been running in the mornings since September 2007. There still is no direct return route to the village, but this is not as large an issue. Traveling from Yerevan is easier than traveling to Yerevan. The villagers have many routes from Yerevan going to neighboring villages where the bus can drop them within a reasonable walking distance to Araksavan.

The route from Vosketap village in central Ararat Region to Yerevan took students nearly one hour and there was only one 14-seat mini-bus to serve 50 students. Most students struggled to find alternative transportation. The YAC organized a meeting with students and brainstormed ideas—a technique they learned in the Community Action Planning (CAP) workshop while establishing their club in May 2007.

From the many ideas generated, they decided to approach the village municipality for help, and wrote a letter, signed by all of the students in the village, to the mayor requesting a bus instead of a minivan. This may seem like a simple thing to do, but in a society that still feels the effects of authoritarian rule, this was truly a bold step. To their surprise, the mayor, seeing the urgency and need of their request, agreed to support the students and arranged to

replace the minivan with a passenger bus large enough to accommodate them all.

The absence of a direct round-trip route to Yerevan universities had been a significant problem for the students of Aramus village in Kotayk Region. In the summer of 2007, the Aramus YAC held a series of community meetings to discuss student transportation. They developed a step-by-step project plan for opening a direct route to and from Yerevan. The plan showed the exact numbers of students who would use the transport, pick-up and drop-off locations, and an optimal timetable for operating the service. They presented the proposal to the mayor and Village Council to gain the support of the municipality. The mayor and Council members supported the project and in the following weeks the YAC worked with the municipality to open the route. The service began operating in October 2007 with a one-way fare of 200 AMD (~\$0.65 US).

The YAC attended the December 2007 Aramus Village Council meeting to thank the community leaders for their support. As an expression of his gratitude for their efforts, the mayor moved to allocate funds in the 2008 community budget to pay for the new student transportation service. The motion was unanimously approved and now Aramus village university students have free transportation services to attend class. This effort bolstered the youth's confidence in their

“If in the past we were waiting for the government to solve our problems, today we initiate solving some problems on our own by engaging the relevant governmental or non-governmental structures.”

- LYOVA SARGSYAN, TCHAMBARAK CAC MEMBER (GEGHARKUNIK REGION)

ability to effect change. It also showed how collaboration between the YAC and the municipality can bring about successful civic initiatives.

Ltchashen is a small village on the shores of Lake Sevan in the Gegharkunik Region. Like most of the small villages on the main road around the lake, the public transportation route is established and functions well for the community's needs. However, in the middle of the academic year, the Ltchashen YAC received a request from community students to help them find out why the Ltchashen-Gavar public transportation fare increased from 800 AMD to 1000 AMD (\$2.60 to \$3.30 US). The fare hike of 200 AMD was steep for many students. Most of them did not work, were from poorer families, and traveled every day by the mini-bus to get to the university in Gavar.

The YAC convened a meeting at their Action Center, and decided first to request an explanation for the increased fare from the transportation company. The company told the YAC that the fare increase was because the road from Ltchashen to Gavar was in disrepair and that the fare increase would offset increased expenses in vehicle maintenance and repair. The YAC was not satisfied with this explanation. Using knowledge they had gained about accessing public information, they had learned that fare rates were fixed by the Regional Department of Transportation (GDOT) and could not be changed without going through a request process with the DOT. Armed with this information, the YAC presented the problem to the village mayor. The mayor then officially requested an explanation from the transportation company. The company, being unable to legally justify the increase in the

fare, lowered it back to the original 800 AMD. To date, the Ltchashen students continue traveling to Gavar University every day and pay the regular fare of 800 AMD. An organized and knowledgeable group of individuals took action to protect their rights.

The Nor Kharberd CAC in the Ararat Region received many complaints about insufficient public transport in the community. Nor Kharberd is a large village of around 7,000 people with two routes serviced by 15-passenger mini-buses. These routes also served the neighboring community of 15,000 residents. In response to the complaints, the CAC conducted a survey in January 2008 to

discover the views of a larger segment of the community about transportation availability and quality of service.

The survey results confirmed that a significant number of community members found the public transportation system inadequate.

After the survey, the CAC collected 650 signatures and prepared a petition that requested changing the mini-buses to larger buses on the two routes. The petition was sent to the village mayor with a request to raise the issue at regional and national government levels. In September, as a result of the petition 16 new 32-passenger buses were allocated to the community. The CAC's initiative and the community's active involvement successfully solved their transportation problem.



**INVOLVE ALL STAKEHOLDERS
IN RESOLVING THE ISSUES.**





IMPROVING COMMUNITIES

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

STEP BY STEP

At its core, civic participation is about people working to make a difference in their communities and bringing together a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to have a positive impact. YCAP has helped to build the momentum of civic participation in the context of volunteerism to promote the quality of life for everyone through non-political processes.

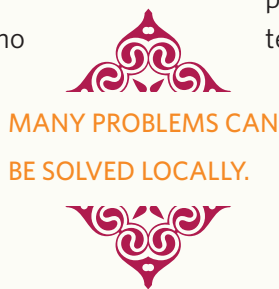
For over a decade, there had been no kindergarten in Areni, a village in the southern region of Vayots Dzor, and village residents were concerned. The issue was raised for the first time during the Community Action Planning Workshop in the fall 2005. The CAC brought this issue to the attention of the mayor, who raised the issue with the regional governor. Shortly thereafter, the mayor informed the CAC that the regional government planned to build a new village health clinic. He suggested that former clinic

might be renovated for the kindergarten. The old clinic was perfect, since it is in a central location in the village and has green space that could serve as a playground.

To engage the community further, the CAC organized a meeting with the director of the Vayots Dzor Regional Education, Culture, and Sports Department to discuss the project and possible support. CAC members,

teachers, young parents, representatives of local government, and other active community residents attended the meeting. The CAC president presented the need for village kindergarten, citing the importance of early childhood education for a healthy productive

society and the historical emphasis on education in Armenian history. The village mayor presented some possible solutions, including the renovation of the old health clinic.



MANY PROBLEMS CAN
BE SOLVED LOCALLY.

The Education Department director shared how this process could be organized to pass more effectively through the current regional administrative system. The building was under the jurisdiction of the Health Department, not the Education Department. At the Education Department's suggestion, the CAC and community residents prepared and sent a petition to the regional government signed by all interested residents requesting that the old health clinic be reallocated for the kindergarten. The regional government sent back a positive response. They would not only transfer the building to the village for use as a kindergarten, but also allocated funds from the regional budget for renovations and repairs.

The new health facility was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2008. Instead of waiting for the renovation of the health clinic the CAC organized a pre-school camp—Astghik (Star)—for community children ages 4–8 during the summers of 2007 and 2008. They divided the children into five groups by age and developed a program for each group. The CAC and community volunteers served as

counselors and gave classes in painting, music, singing, dance, healthy lifestyle, environment, sports, and social rules of conduct. The village municipality, the school, and the parents of the children attending the camps covered the costs of the notebooks, pens, paint, and paper. The school provided the desks and chairs. At the end of each camp, the children performed songs and dances they learned and exhibited their paintings and handicrafts. Until the kindergarten is opened, these camps will continue to prepare children for their first school year.



WHEN A SOLUTION IS GOING TO
TAKE TIME, THINK OF AN INTERIM
SOLUTION TO BRIDGE THE GAP
AND NOT LOSE MOMENTUM.



When the National Parliament of Armenia held hearings on a rural development program for border villages, the Areni mayor, residents, and CAC presented the case for including their village in this program, discussing the need for a kindergarten.

They anticipate a positive response from the parliament and regional government to support this initiative and plan to have a working kindergarten by the summer of 2009. The residents of Areni began their quest for a kindergarten by organizing at the local level, and two years later they were presenting this issue to the National Parliament.



Areni CAC members preparing for a community event

ARENİ CAC MEMBERS

Lejan is a small village in the northern region of Lori. As in most rural villages, people live an agrarian life often characterized by long hours of toil in the spring planting season and in the fall during harvest. For the past several years, the regional government has organized a harvest festival in a neighboring village in which Lejan residents participate. The Lejan YAC felt this festiveness was missing in their village. In the fall of 2007, they decided to

organize the *First Annual Lejan Village Harvest Festival*. Since this was a first-time event in the village, the youth conducted a community survey to find out if residents would participate. Villagers responded enthusiastically to the idea of a local festival and were ready to take part.

The YAC organized the community into groups of two to three families and set up tables (student desks borrowed from the school) in the village square. On the morning of the festival, the families gathered in the square to decorate the tables with varieties of vegetables, fruits, and homemade dishes. During the festival, the community sampled food, exchanged recipes, sang songs, danced, and recited poetry. People from the neighboring villages and towns also attended at the invitation of the YAC. At the end of the day, the community residents were so pleased with the outcome of the event that they asked the YAC to make the Harvest Festival celebration a tradition in the community and to organize it every year.

For 2008, the YAC involved the community more in planning and organizing the harvest festival. The YAC visited village families and asked them to organize themselves into groups of two to three families to arrange logistics. With the success of the previous year's festival, the residents readily agreed. With the help of a Peace Corps volunteer in their village, they included an "American Table" with American fare and desserts.

In 2007 the youth organized the festival on a very small budget. For the 2008 festival, they wanted to have awards for categories such as

Best Table, Best Dessert, Tastiest Tomatoes, and Biggest Pumpkin, and for this they needed more funding. They organized a youth charity fun run and collected small monetary pledges from the families whose children participated in the run. They applied to the village mayor for funds from the municipal budget, and to the International Outreach Camp Alumni Fund, a fund that encourages civic awareness and participation. They raised a total of 73,000 AMD (\$250 US), which was enough to cover the purchase of ribbons and awards.

The festival was a great success, this time with the participation of the whole community. Through this initiative of the Lejan youth, residents became more involved in community life. Gatherings such as the festival encourage interaction and discussion of other community issues, which can result in action and civic engagement.

The CAC in Aragats village, located in the center of Armenia on the eastern slope of Mt. Aragats in the region of Aragatsotn, placed suggestion boxes throughout the community as an easy means for residents to bring issues to them. What emerged were many complaints about inaccuracies in land measurements related to land registration. The CAC suggested calling cadastre officials to a meeting to resolve this issue.

They organized a meeting with the director of the State Cadastre Committee to discuss the poor work of the regional cadastre offices that led to these problems.

The residents of the neighboring villages heard about the CAC's initiative and asked if they could participate since they, too, had



GET INFORMATION OUT TO
THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY.



complaints about land registration and the work of the regional cadastre offices. Since the issues affected so many, the CAC invited the mayors from the surrounding 25 villages to take part in the meeting so that they could inform their own residents of the outcome and how to resolve the issues. The CAC also invited a Member of Parliament.

At the meeting the CAC presented the residents' complaints, the consequences of incorrect measurements of land plots and other property, and the disputes that originated from mistakes in the residents' ownership documents. The State Cadastre Committee director formed a special committee to study



Meeting of cadastre representatives and Village Mayors organized by Aragats CAC

the issue, and together with the village municipalities and residents, correct the mistakes in the ownership documents.

The work began in spring 2008 and the CAC continues to be closely involved. As of September 2008, 50 land plots and houses were re-measured and the owners received new ownership certificates with corrected measurements of their land plots and real estate value. The committee continues its work, addressing the complaints of community members who have registered with the village municipality for re-measurement of their land plots and real

estate. The re-measurement work will continue through 2009.

Also in the Aragatsotn Region in the town of Aparan, the youth created an Aparan town volunteer network. Because volunteerism is still in its infancy in Armenia, this was a big undertaking. The YAC had matured greatly in its first three years and members used the skills they had learned to foster the network. As a first step, the youth held a round-table meeting at their Action Center to brainstorm ways of attracting volunteers and promoting volunteerism. After an exchange of ideas and past experience with organizing volunteers, the youth conducted a survey and held focus group meetings (one with students and one with adults) to gather opinions regarding volunteerism, willingness to become a volunteer, and in what areas. The YAC found that many community residents were ready to volunteer. The YAC began creating a database of volunteers with this information.

Community residents welcomed the idea. Others who had not participated in the survey or focus groups who heard about this effort asked the YAC to register their names in the database. The YAC is still adding names to the database. Thus far, university students have volunteered to tutor school students in different subjects and others have volunteered to visit elderly residents in the town who are confined to their homes to provide social contact and assist with household chores. Professionals in the town have expressed interest in providing seminars to the youth and community members in areas of health, education, and ecology. The YAC is very enthusiastic about coordinating the work of volunteers and further promoting volunteerism in their town.


“After coming together in the Youth Action Club, the young people became more self-confident. If previously they thought that it was impossible to do anything without money, now they know that if there is a will and desire to work and initiate something useful for the community, money becomes secondary.”

- OVSANNA KHANDILYAN, AYGEPAT YAC MEMBER (ARARAT MARZ)

Meghradzor is a village of about 2,700 people nestled in a narrow valley of Kotayk Region of central Armenia. When the CAC learned that village leaders had agreed to let a group of businessmen build a gold processing factory on land reserved for agricultural development, they organized a community meeting and invited the businessmen and community leaders to discuss this issue. Residents were concerned about pollution and reduced prospects for community development if the gold processing factory were built on the reserved lands. A heated discussion ensued, but the CAC succeeded in convincing the village mayor, Village Council members, and even the businessmen to abandon the proposal and keep the land for community development. The participants believed that this action increased their self-confidence and trust in their own strengths and abilities to solve problems, and enhanced their understanding of how voicing their opinions and engaging in civic activism can have a positive impact on the community.

Increased accountability of local government, the role and responsibilities of the Village Council, and community issues were the topics of a meeting the Gandzakar (Tavush Region) CAC organized for the village municipality and interested residents. The Village Council explained its community function and reported on their work over the past year. Participants raised a number of issues, but emphasized the lack of garbage removal service in the community. As a result of the meeting, the village leaders allocated funds to organize garbage removal services and buy a vehicle and other

necessary equipment. Inspired by the results, residents asked the CAC to organize similar meetings regularly with the municipality to discuss and solve other issues.



ENCOURAGE CLUBS TO START WITH LESS COMPLEX ISSUES THAT ARE LIKELY TO SUCCEED TO BUILD SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE. TACKLE BIGGER ISSUES LATER.





Summer camp organized by Areni CAC for community children



Harvest Festival organized in Lejan community by Lejan YAC members

The Youth and Community Action Program Methodology

Throughout Armenia there are 37 Youth Action Clubs (YACs) and 43 Community Action Committees (CACs) active in 80 communities—8 communities in each of the 10 regions. The communities are primarily rural, with a median population of 2,549 and with a range of 206 to 14,400 residents.

AED designed YCAP to provide a sustained foundation for community organizations and networks across rural Armenia to support community development that engaged the broad range of citizens in each community, with particular focus on youth leadership development. To do this, YCAP program staff helped communities establish youth action clubs (YAC) and community action committees (CAC). After these civic groups were established and Community Action Planning (CAP) Workshops were held, group members were responsible for generating the resources to initiate and carry out their activities. YCAP staff provided initial technical assistance and advice. However, designing, implementing, and finding resources for activities are the responsibilities of the YACs and CACs. This provided a model for supporting organized mechanisms for community participation that can be established in a relatively short time at a low cost.

There are three main components to the methodology YCAP used to develop YACs and CACs and increase grassroots civic participation.

- 1. ESTABLISH YACS AND CACS AND GUIDE THEIR FORMATION.** Give them a framework and guidelines, but do not tell them exactly what to do. Let them figure out most of it themselves.
- 2. TRAIN THEM.** Give young people and adults the opportunities to develop awareness and knowledge and learn the skills they need to successfully address youth, community, and public concerns they themselves identify.
- 3. LEARN BY DOING.** Foster YAC's and CAC's ability to carry out projects that benefit the general public or a targeted community group, lead to improvement in the way issues are addressed, and encourage a shift toward approaches that are more likely to succeed over the long term.

YCAP used a **FOUR-PHASE APPROACH** that evolved over time to initiate citizen engagement in a broad array of civic issues at the grassroots level.

1. COMMUNITY SELECTION

Send letters to communities that briefly explain the program and invite them to participate in a competitive selection process.

2. INTRODUCTORY MEETINGS

After the selection process, work with the community to advertise an upcoming Introductory Meeting to maximize attendance. It is at this town-hall-style meeting that the “right” people step forward to get involved.

3. COMMUNITY ACTION PLANNING WORKSHOPS

This important element introduces the newly formed group to the principles of planning and implementing projects in a simple, straightforward, and interactive one-day workshop. By the end of the day, the group has a framework from which to start, with people assigned to duties and timeframes for accomplishing activities. It is essential to get the group started on a strong track with clear goals and an understanding of how to accomplish them.

4. CONTINUED SUPPORT

By having to find their own funding for their community projects, they come to rely more on themselves. They realize their potential to shape the future of their society. Continued support comes in the form of special programs and assistance with continued organizational and capacity development.

Having a flexible approach was also integral to YCAP’s success because it allowed AED to capitalize on lessons learned, and make appropriate changes for greater effectiveness as the program evolved.

Phase I: Community Selection

Communities were selected in phases in a process that evolved over time. Over the four years of the program, 10 new communities were added to the program every six months for a total of 80 communities. YCAP developed the following criteria that were used to select the 80 communities:

- Commitment from the community mayor to support the program enthusiastically

- Commitment from the business community to provide program support
- Viable school or other public institution willing to host the program, demonstrated by a written commitment from the director
- Civic leaders who want to be involved
- Possible NGOs working in the community who may collaborate on activities
- Youth and residents who are eager to participate

In the final form that evolved to select the last 40 communities, AED sent an invitation letter and a one-page program description addressed to the mayor and school director of all of the rural municipalities not yet participating. The materials instructed them to

contact their YCAP Regional Coordinator for more information and an application packet if they were interested in participating in the program's competitive selection process. The packet contained a community demographics form, a questionnaire for the municipal government, and a questionnaire for the school management.

This approach allowed for some self-selection; only those communities that were truly interested in the program applied. The first step was for the mayor to read and share the letter with other people in the community. Second, he or she had to contact their regional coordinator for an application packet. Thirdly, at least four people (specified in the instructions as the mayor, deputy mayor, school director, and deputy school director or civics teacher) had to be involved in completing the packet and submitting it by the specified deadline. From over 850 letters sent, YCAP received 72 applications. AED formed a selection committee to evaluate, rank, discuss, and select the final 40 participant communities based on the criteria. AED then informed all of the communities about the results of the selection process, both those selected and not selected, and told the mayors of the selected communities when their start date would be and what was expected of them to prepare for the program. The regional coordinators then followed-up with each community mayor or school director to prepare them for Phase II, the Introductory Meeting.

Phase II: Introductory Meeting

YCAP held a town-hall-style meeting facilitated by the Regional Coordinator to introduce the program to the broader community. YCAP advertised the Introductory Meeting in the community at least one week in advance using posters and word-of-mouth

as well as having small group meetings and program presentations to attract a diverse audience. The Regional Coordinators played a key role by building the initial relationship with community leaders through a series of visits to prepare them for the Introductory Meeting.

For this meeting, the community was responsible for finding a room in a public building (school, municipal building, or cultural center) where their Action Group (either CAC or YAC) could plan activities, hold community seminars, and have guest speaker events. The communities were required to repair and renovate the space to minimum, achievable standards—the room was required to have secure windows and doors, have electricity, and not have a leaky roof. This initial investment demonstrated the community's commitment to support their future YAC or CAC.



YCAP STAFF MEMBERS

YCAP Introductory meeting in Bavra, Shirak Region

During the Introductory Meeting, the YCAP Regional Coordinator explained how the program worked and distributed a Frequently Asked Questions handout to guide the discussion. A representative from an established YAC or CAC in another community was also present and spoke about his or her experience with the program. This was followed by an open Q&A session where attendees were free to ask anything pertaining to the program. To close the meeting, the Regional Coordinator asked for volunteers to form an Initiative Group, which would be responsible for organizing the community for the upcoming Community Action Planning Workshop, and to complete the preparations for the Action Center.

Phase III: Community Action Planning (CAP) Workshop

By the time they reached this phase, it became fairly clear whether a community would establish a YAC or a CAC, a key factor being the number of young people who participated in all aspects of the program up to this point. To establish and activate the YACs and CACs, the YCAP Regional Coordinators conducted one-day Community Action Planning Workshops with about 30 members from the community. The CAP workshop helped solidify the decision for a YAC or a CAC—part of the self-determination process in each community.

The Initiative Group formed during the introductory meeting, along with other people identified in coordination with the Regional Coordinator as active in the community, comprised the participant group for the CAP workshop. During this process, the Regional Coordinators worked closely with the community to help them identify



YCAP STAFF MEMBERS

Community Action Planning Workshop in Haykazdor

people who would actively participate and also helped to ensure gender balance and a diverse representation of age groups, professions, and positions in the community. The CAP workshop took place in the community, if possible in the room that was to become the group's Action Center. During the workshop, YCAP staff members led the participants through a series of activities through which they discussed community issues and developed a framework for a community action plan to guide them as they planned and carried out projects.

Following the CAP workshop, and after Action Center renovations were completed, YCAP provided the newly formed YAC or CAC a computer workstation, including a printer/fax/scanner and furnishings for the Action Center. This simple and inexpensive initial investment of approximately \$3,500 US allowed for the group to develop a formal place for their activities and, coupled with their newly developed action plan, a sense of purpose.

Phase IV: Continued Support

A primary element to YCAP's success has been providing guidance to YACs and CACs to help them identify their own resources for planning and implementing their activities. Unlike a number of programs that provide

seed funding for community projects, YCAP does not give community activity grants or the equivalent. Instead, the initial guidance and facilitation from the YCAP Regional Coordinator's helped the YACs and CACs to identify their own resources and, through this process, inspired them to develop their groups as self-sustaining mechanisms for ongoing community and youth development.

An important part of this process was that it was exploratory—to find out how systems work, who influential people are and what they do, and where resources lie. YACs and CACs were provided guidance and ongoing coaching but developed their own processes for planning, identifying resources, and carrying out activities. This was important both for YACs and CACs to own the process and adapt it to the particular context and community. This also allowed natural leaders within the community groups to emerge.

As part of this process, YCAP staff recognized the need to support the YACs and CACs in their organizational development and, therefore, held seminars on guidelines for organizing volunteer community groups about one month after the CAP workshops.

The seminars adapted concepts from *The Citizen's Handbook: A Guide to Building Community* by Charles Dobson from the Vancouver Citizen's Committee (<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/>). Another influential work for the YCAP approach regarding group structure and conduct was the seven principles of democratic structuring as defined by Jo Freeman. Briefly, these are:

- 1. DELEGATE** specific authority to specific individuals for specific tasks by democratic procedures.
- 2. REQUIRE** all those to whom authority has been delegated to be **RESPONSIBLE** to all those who selected them.
- 3. DISTRIBUTE** authority among as many people as is reasonably possible.
- 4. ROTATE** tasks among individuals.
- 5. ALLOCATE** tasks along rational criteria.
- 6. DIFFUSE INFORMATION** to everyone as frequently as possible.
- 7. GIVE EQUAL ACCESS TO RESOURCES** needed by the group.

In addition, YCAP supports the civic development of YAC and CAC members through four core programs.

“When these principles are applied, they ensure that whatever structures are developed...will be controlled by and be responsible to the group... [Group leaders] will not be in such an easy position to institutionalize their power because ultimate decisions will be made by the group at large.”

~ JO FREEMAN, *THE TYRANNY OF STRUCTURELESSNESS*
[HTTP://WWW.JOFREEMAN.COM/JOREEN/TYRANNY.HTM](http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm)



YCAP STAFF MEMBERS

Asset Mapping Training organized for Aparan YAC members

1. **The Yerevan in 5 Days Civic Education Program** for youth is a week-long event during which approximately 30 YAC members receive an inside look at national government structures and participate in seminars given by civil society organizations. Modeled after the “Washington, DC in 6 Days” program from the Close Up Foundation (<http://closeup.org/>), *Yerevan in 5 Days* helps develop youth in several ways:

- Youth **GAIN** greater knowledge of the basic concepts of government (both national and local) and citizenship in Armenia.
- They **ENHANCE** their understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a participatory democracy.
- They **LEARN** how constituents, interest groups, and party politics affect the legislative process.
- They **DEEPEN** their understanding of the impact of the structure of government on society.
- They **EXPLORE** diverse viewpoints concerning domestic and international policy questions facing the National Assembly.

YCAP youth round out the week with a seminar on local government so that when

they go back to their villages and towns, they better understand how they can approach and work with their community leaders.

2. Through an annual **Grassroots Civic Activism Study Tour**, between 20 and 40 YAC and CAC representatives per year are exposed to the challenges civic groups in other transitional countries have faced in developing volunteerism and civic engagement and the successful approaches they have used. The tours feature seven days of interactive workshops and site visits, where the participants learn new ideas and also share their experiences and approaches with their host-country counterparts. The program is organized by a host-country NGO selected through a competitive process. To date, YAC and CAC members have gone to Kiev, Ukraine, and Novosibirsk, Russia. Upon their return to Armenia, the participants report their experiences to their community



STUDY TOUR PARTICIPANTS

Grassroots Civic Activism Study Tour to Ukraine for CAC members (September 2007)



YCAP STAFF MEMBERS

Poster Exhibition during the YCAP Conference

groups and look for ways to apply what they have learned. For example, during the youth study tour in Ukraine, they learned an activity called *Quest—Community Change Agents*. *Quest’s* aim was to practice effective community engagement techniques using knowledge and skills they gained earlier in their program. Through *Quest*, youth developed a community mobilization plan, involved followers, and identified the best leadership style for carrying out the project. Several youth clubs have used this novel community mobilization tool in their own communities.

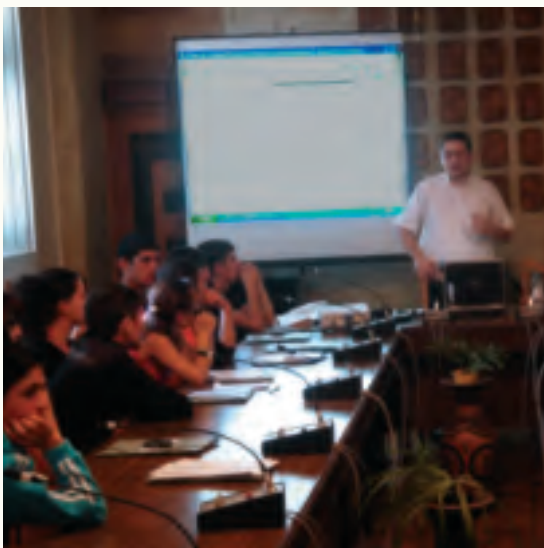
3. In addition to having more formal sessions and workshops, the **Annual YCAP Communities National Conference** encourages participants from all communities to network and learn from each other and to support establishment of a larger network of involved communities across Armenia. The first three-

day conference included three tracks: Leadership, Public Relations, and Civic Advocacy. Participants made poster presentations that represented what YACs and CACs contributed to their communities’ economic, social, educational, democratic, cultural, and environmental progress. The last day-and-a-half was reserved for an Open Space (<http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?AboutOpenSpace>) session whose theme of Community Collaboration helped establish a strong network of people engaged in civic action throughout Armenia. This, in part, led to the development of the YCAP *Community Coordination Mechanism*, described below. Between 160 and 180 community members participated in the conference each year.

The second Annual YCAP Conference continued with similar thematic sessions and

poster exhibition. The Open Space theme was *Civic Advocacy at Local, Regional, and National Levels*. Having enriched their knowledge on civic advocacy tools and methods, the participants worked in 10 groups to develop civic advocacy strategies and campaigns to generate ideas to resolve the group's priority problems. Among issues discussed were constraints that youth faced, unemployment and the need to create more jobs in the communities, addressing the needs of vulnerable groups and other people with special needs, developing sports programs, bringing natural gas to communities, improving education, improving access to health care services, improving irrigation systems, and increasing agricultural production. The participants developed plans for civic advocacy campaigns to address these issues and presented the results of their work on the third day of the conference. Participants went back to their communities with a solid plan to advocate for improvements to address one or more public concerns.

4. The capstone of YCAP is the formation of the ***YCAP Community Coordination***



YCAP Conference participants during one of the workshops

Mechanism (CCM). The original design for YCAP included forming some type of national-level association, but in order for this to happen, the community groups needed to reach a level of maturity that allowed them to see the need themselves. The success of this approach was realized at the first annual conference when the YACs and CACs suggested themselves that such an association be formed.

The CCM's purpose is to support the exchange of experiences and to provide a formal network to facilitate collaboration among the communities to address development and other issues that affect the quality of life for citizens of Armenia. The function and structure of the CCM is currently being determined by YAC and CAC members through a series of meetings facilitated by YCAP staff and outside experts. YCAP purposely chose to call this a CCM so as not to impose a specific structure on the YACs and CACs as they work through the process. The type of structure they form (i.e., an association, nongovernmental organization, union, cooperative, etc.) will be determined by them.

By December 2008, YCAP staff members were halfway through the process of conducting the workshops and meetings. For the first meeting, one representative from each YAC and CAC—80 people in all—attended a two-day session to clarify the purpose of the CCM and develop a common vision of how to move forward. The eight representatives from each region formed a regional-level coordination group (RCG). They then selected one person to represent their region at the national-level working meetings. At the national-level meetings, the 10 representatives further developed the

purpose, constitution, and by-laws of the CCM, and then disseminated the information to the RCGs for comment and feedback. The RCG members shared this information with their YAC and CAC members and brought feedback to the CCM representatives about the CCM's structure and purpose. This process was intended to maximize YAC and CAC members' participation to develop and establish the CCM in a fair, transparent, and representative process. Using this process, the CCM is expected to become a robust organization whose members can address and solve pressing community and regional issues and lobby for the needs of rural communities to the national government and international agencies.

In addition, YCAP used many unstructured and non-formal opportunities to guide, support, and train participants. Having very few rules for how the regional coordinators and the community groups can work together, the program staff and community members have been allowed decentralized decision making that has provided the speed and flexibility to take advantage of opportunities that a centrally coordinated program office could not. As a result, self-determination and self-sufficiency become the unwritten mantras within the civic groups.

In addition to the four phases above, the formation of *Sister Communities* has been a successful approach and an indicator that civic activism is gaining a foothold in Armenia. The concept of outreach beyond one's own community is relatively new in Armenia. YCAP gave people the opportunity to expand their notion of community beyond their towns or village's borders.



YCAP STAFF MEMBERS

CCM Development first meeting in Tsakhkadzor

After YCAP's first two years, AED began promoting the idea of Sister Communities and suggested that YACs and CACs collaborate on activities with neighboring communities that were not part of the program by inviting them to take part in events and seminars. It did not take long for this idea to catch on. At present, more than 50 neighboring communities are collaborating with YACs or CACs and have participated in many events and seminars.

As a natural outcome of their exposure to the positive aspects of civic activism, several of the 50 communities expressed an interest in forming similar civic action groups (CAG). YCAP supported these communities in establishing a CAG by conducting CAP workshops with YAC and CAC members as co-facilitators. This not only created more CAGs, it also created opportunities for the people who have gained valuable skills through YCAP and to use those skills for outreach activities and facilitate the growth of civic activism in Armenia.

By the end of year four, seven Sister Communities established CAGs and at least three more are expected in the coming year. The YACs and CACs will continue to cooperate with Sister Community CAGs, and help them on regular basis to develop and carry out projects and foster their own development.



CONCLUSION

In 2009, as the YCAP communities begin their last year of support from AED, they are developing a thriving grassroots civic movement in Armenia and taking on more complex social issues. Over the past four years, these communities and their CAC and YAC members have grown and transformed. Their remarkable progress proves that given a little technical support and the freedom to decide what is important to them, regular citizens, both youth and adult, can make a significant impact on their community's development. To date, there are over 1,500 people participating in YCAP. They have conceived, planned, and implemented over 2,000 activities that have affected the lives of up to 250,000 people.

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AED is a nonprofit organization working globally to improve education, health, civil society and economic development—the foundation of thriving societies. Focusing on the underserved, AED implements more than 250 programs serving people in all 50 U.S. states and more than 150 countries.

YCAP is implemented by staff in the AED Center for Enterprise and Capacity Development (CECD). CECD staff focus on addressing institutional, human capacity, and economic constraints to development through sustainable solutions. For more information about YCAP or other CECD activities, please contact Mark P. Ketcham, Vice President and Director, CECD, at mketcham@aed.org.