

Rural community development in Shirak region, Armenia.

NGO "Women for Development"

- **Scale of activity:** Regional
- **Actor/s:** NGO's, women, men, youth, local government
- **State of the activity:** started in 2008 ongoing
- **Keywords:** local community; participation; youth initiative; entrepreneurship; gender; community mobilization, small business, social projects



Summary

The main goal of the rural community development work of WFD NGO is to improve the quality of life of the target villages' population with the support of locally established active groups through capacity building of the target population, implementation of social and small business projects. During 2008-2020, 62 social projects and youth initiatives have been implemented in the target villages and 10 small business ideas have been developed.

The biggest achievement of WFD in the rural community development is the transformation of the environment and creation of a new culture in target communities: participatory discussions of the community issues, participation of women and girls in the decision making process, development of local fundraising and volunteerism.

Background

"Women for Development" NGO (WFD NGO) was established in 1997, in Gyumri. In the past 23 years since its establishment, main directions of the NGO have been rural community development, women and youth empowerment, peace education – both formal and informal, as well as working towards peace in the region.

The organization's first steps began with implementation of family planning, healthy lifestyle and HIV/AIDS prevention projects in the rural communities of Shirak province. In 1999-2007, four health care projects were implemented in more than 70 rural communities of the province. In the indicated timeframe, "Healthy Family" centres were established in all beneficiary communities, more than 100 nurses were trained, around 4000 women and girls received

information about reproductive health, reproductive rights and family planning, and



around 5000 rural women, men and youth obtained basic knowledge on prevention of STDs and HIV/AIDS.

The NGO's 10 – year experience of working in the rural communities of the province, knowledge of not only health care issues, but also existing social problems triggered the organization to start thinking about developing new approaches of community interventions.

WFD NGO organize the work based on the « **Not for the community, but together with the community** » slogan. The organization is making sure to keep working with various community groups up until the point when they realize and value the necessity of initiating and carrying out a specific project themselves.

Based on its previous experience, the NGO also developed its own and very effective methods and mechanisms of working with rural communities. As the result, the target communities have become stronger, unified and able to independently analyse and evaluate their existing needs and opportunities.

Below are 6 main steps, describing WFD NGO's rural community development approach:

1) Community mobilization;

- 2) Increased participation;
- 3) Capacity development of community members;
- 4) Raising local issues;
- 5) Promoting local businesses and social projects;
- 6) Conflict management.

Description of main activities

Starting from 2008, WFD NGO began its new and structured community development activities in 12 villages of Shirak province.

- Community centres were established in all target villages, active groups comprised of 10-15 community members were formed.
- Capacity development trainings were conducted on the topics of community mobilization and increased participation, civil society, women's rights, writing competitive project proposals, leadership, conflict management, small business development, and other relevant themes.
- Participation of the beneficiary community members in different local and international training / workshops /
- 3-year strategic community development plans were created for all beneficiary communities, based on the participatory approach, involving village mayors, council members and various community representatives.
- Active groups are established in the target communities and their members (mostly women and young girls) are involved in the processes of raising community issues and resolving them.
- Fundraising and volunteering are also actively promoted among community population.

Community mobilisation in Shirak region:

Our goal is to empower communities so that people will not only be able to raise problems but also will actively participate in solving them. Together with the communities and local municipalities, we agreed to develop alternative strategic plans involving the entire community. Active groups of volunteers helped to carry out a survey among about 80% of the population in each community.

Based on focus group meetings and discussions, WFD and active volunteering groups started developing the

strategic plans for each community.

People have prioritized community problems and suggested possible solutions for each. Some problems could be solved by using local resources, such as cultural and extra curriculum activities for children, others required an internal support, and the rest needed to be addressed by state institutions.

Capacity building and addressing problems:

A challenge WFD had to face is people **lack of faith in believing that they can change their lives**. We envision communities as confident and competent enough to face their problems without waiting for someone to come and bring a solution.

To do so, a series of project proposal writing seminars were organised in each community, **helping participant to obtain funding for their ideas to drive change**. Participants worked in groups and addressed what they see as priority local problems, developed it into a project. A few projects have already received support and are up and running.

Outlook – Prospect

Results achieved:

- 12 community active groups were established, including 4 youth initiative groups with more than 53 youth involved (26 boys and 27 girls). 109 events and trainings are organized involving more than 300 schoolchildren and youngsters.
- In total, 52 capacity building trainings were organized for more than 400 community members (women, men and youth).
- 62 social projects were implemented, which to some extent improved lives of approximately 4000 people, living in the target villages (more than the half of total population). Among the most successful initiatives it is worth mentioning street lighting, renovation and equipping kindergartens, events halls and youth centers, renovation of waterlines, etc. It should also be mentioned that all the labour is done voluntarily by the community members.
- 23 young women and men from 8 target communities participated in business trainings.
- Small grants were provided to fund 10 business projects, 8 of which are run by women.
- Community Forum Theater groups were established



in 7 target communities, with participation of over 150 schoolchildren. In total, 32 scenarios were developed, which are raising various problems and conflicts existing in the communities. In total, 30 performances and public discussion were organized.

- Civil society organizations are formed in 2 beneficiary communities.
- Community foundations are established in 3 beneficiary communities.

Next steps

“Women for Development” is starting piloting the LEADER approach to rural community development in Armenia. The LEADER approach has not been applied in Armenia up to now yet, and we will be doing it for the first time. It is envisaged to pilot the LEADER approach in 8 rural settlements of Sarapat consolidated community in Shirak province.

Main challenges

Since 2011 the government of the Republic of Armenia has initiated and started to gradually implement community consolidation plan. The new system is called to support the process of formation of an economically powerful and financially sustainable community and assumes cooperation and investment of a common approach, effective usage of community resources and improvement of the quality of services provided by local authorities.

Observations of the public attitudes show, that the investment of the system required essential social, psychological, legal and economic preparedness. Implementation of community consolidation in such haste, without proper preparation and awareness is not likely to bring the wanted results, as in many cases population of the united communities has passive, indifferent and sometimes very negative attitude towards the program. The ownership to the process either does not exist or is very weakly expressed; the sense of belongingness to the new union is almost missing. The

attitudes of the population and state government towards the community consolidation program are controversial. Only very small communities, which were not able to implement any project with their own financial, human and material resources, somehow benefited from the community consolidation. In spite of the complaints the new government is going to finalize the process of communities' consolidation by the end of 2021.

It is almost impossible to influence the government's policy on community consolidation. Our role as an NGO is to support the local population, including women and youth, to become participants in the decision making processes in their communities.

In frames of the current project WFD NGO plays the role of a mediator between the local population and local authorities both in Sarapat consolidated community and other beneficiary communities. We have a goal to register positive democratic changes in the communities working with both the local population and local self-government bodies.

Source and contact

Information gathered at: the European Rural Parliament 2019 Market of initiatives (6 Nov. 2019);

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