

## **'Adopt-A-Village'**

### **Making a difference, one Armenian village at a time**

**By Alexander Galitsky**

#### **Village-to-village**

[Adopt-a-Village](#) (AAV) is the brainchild of New Zealander Len Wicks and his wife Armine Hakobyan. The concept is straightforward: diasporan communities are matched with a region of Armenia and work collaboratively with leadership of local villages (and indirectly with local/regional governments) to undertake projects to benefit the community. AAV works in concert with two other projects: [the 'Origins' project](#), a movie trilogy aimed at attracting tourism to the revitalised villages; and the Genocide Project that actively promotes recognition of crimes against humanity and the need for reparations.

The concept of 'Adopt-a-Village' isn't new - but it is unique. Several other projects that operate on a similar basis to micro-development have been undertaken in post-colonial indigenous communities and underdeveloped areas in South America, Africa and Southeast Asia. What differentiates AAV from other programs is its implementation. Whereas many other village adoption projects require a minimum funding threshold to undertake projects, AAV's programs in many cases involve little or no cash, instead utilising a wealth of diasporan resources in direct person-to-person interaction, training, skill exchange and consultation.

#### **A fresh approach for diaspora-homeland relations**

AAV's approach is also unique in terms of the Armenian diaspora's role in homeland development. To date, the organised diaspora's development strategy has been focused on political advocacy and lobbying for official development assistance from host governments. These initiatives perhaps add most value in terms of their capacity to engage with developmental institutions such as the UNDP and USAID. However, there are obstacles at every stage of the process: bureaucratic barriers from diaspora organisations, host governments, and international organisations and the homeland government; and in the implementation stage. The failure to effectively set in place long-term development strategies, and the susceptibility of these high-value projects to corruption, means that often these modes of engagement are unsustainable.

Private initiatives have proven more effective on that front. Unlike foreign aid that operates at the national policy level, organisations like the [Children of Armenia Fund](#) (COAF) operate at the local level, providing access to water, electricity, gas and roads, as well as investments in important infrastructure such as schools, health clinics, and community centres. COAF has been responsible for raising over \$17 million since its inception in 2000, and operates in 22 rural villages across Armenia. However, even incredibly successful projects such as these have their limitations. Armenia has 800-900 villages, and COAF simply does not have the numbers on the ground to be able to oversee projects of that volume.

This is where AAV's advantage shows. By pairing a diasporan community to a region, AAV achieves an outreach that no organisation currently operating in Armenia can. Even with a relatively small group assigned to each village, the diaspora can serve an important consultative role, such as guiding local communities through the implementation of initiatives and producing long-term sustainable development strategies. In addition, the AAV model overcomes many of the challenges associated with large-scale projects, in particular corruption, and establishes three-way accountability between diaspora, village and local government.

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While the diasporan partner does not communicate with the local and regional governments directly, village representatives liaising with AAV do, allowing villages to build vital political relationships and incentivising local government's participation in development. A direct result of AAV's work is to foster a sense of social responsibility at the local and regional governmental levels.

### **Breaking the cycle of dependency and poverty**

This is particularly important given Armenia's economic climate. Foreign aid, diaspora investment, foreign direct investment and remittances constitute a large segment of Armenia's economy. Remittances alone (coming from Armenian workers across the diaspora) make up over 14% of Armenia's GDP. At its peak, foreign aid from the United States alone constituted nearly 1% of Armenia's GDP. To put this in perspective; in Australia (a highly developed and diversified economy), the mining and agricultural sectors are considered the nation's most valuable assets. However, they only amount to 7% and 12% of the country's GDP respectively. In short: in Armenia, foreign money coming in is worth more as a percentage of GDP than two of Australia's most valuable economic sectors.

The consequence of this is a high level of dependency on foreign income. This discourages the central government from pursuing economic reform; instead, they become dependent on diasporan money to implement unsustainable policies. This becomes problematic when the source of income is unreliable, and diasporan remittances are incredibly volatile. Since 2013, diasporan remittances have been in free-fall, from a peak of nearly 20% of GDP in 2013. If this percentage continues to decline at the precipitous rate it has done for the last 4 years, the government of Armenia will have fewer resources to allocate to basic social services and infrastructure projects.

As a primarily non-financial project, AAV is encouraging organic development based on the more effective utilisation of human resources (both local and diasporan). It is fundamentally a program of self-empowerment; providing a valuable network of support and advice for local populations to begin revitalising their villages. Armenia's villages are the backbone of both Armenia's livelihood and culture; it is here where you find the farmers who feed the cities, the craftsmen who carry on the ancient traditions of our forefathers and the men who will gladly lay down their lives in service of their country.

Yet despite being such a vital part of the nation, they are the most neglected. Their voices and interests are unheard in national politics; they have the least access to education, healthcare and employment; and some still struggle with the most basic human needs of running water, electricity and gas.

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As the diaspora, we have no greater responsibility to our countrymen than to support them in their efforts to empower themselves and escape the cycle of poverty, underdevelopment and under-utilised potential. The vision of AAV is to make a difference, one Armenian village at a time.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how AAV establishes itself not only within the villages, but also in the diasporan communities themselves. The AAV launch in Australia on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April was convened by Dr Armen Gakavian, founder Len Wicks and his wife Armine Hakobyan, with the blessing of His Grace Bishop Haigazoun Najarian, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Australia and New Zealand, in an encouraging display of community solidarity. Community political figures, including Kaylar Michaelian, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Artsakh in Australia, and City of Ryde councillors Artin Etmekdjian and Sarkis Yedelian, were also in attendance, with NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian writing a letter of support for the initiative that was read in her absence. Additionally, the launch was addressed by a panel of distinguished members of the Australia-Armenian

community; Gayane Kachatryan, Sarineh Manoukian and Sassoon Grigorian, as well as AAV Australia's contact in Shatin village.

Discussed were the ways in which AAV could be best implemented and orchestrated by the Australian-Armenian diaspora. In a consultative process, it would have to be decided what those long term goals were, which projects to prioritise, how best to assist (either through formulating strategy or participating in a skills exchange program with Shatin village), how to audit or survey Shatin and surrounding villages to assess their needs, and how to develop local economy in the process, particularly through tourism and by providing Armenia with access to electronic transfer services that would allow international transactions to take place.

But while we are right to approach these initiatives with optimism, we should also be wary of the risks of introspection. Past diasporan endeavours have proven ineffective when they do not proceed along equitable terms, where a patronising diaspora decides it knows what homeland Armenians need better than they do. The successful suggestions and initiatives from the diaspora, on the other hand, provide Armenians with solutions that they then have the autonomy to implement themselves, and that can be worked towards through consultation and international collaboration. To ensure that AAV falls into the latter category, a concerted effort must be made to ensure the villages are granted the self-determination to prioritise those projects of immediate concern to them. If the intention of AAV is sustainable self-generated development, only allowing the villages to take full responsibility for their efforts will allow that.

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As we approach the 102<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the commencement of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks, we are reminded of the history of ruthless barbarism by occupying powers that has ravaged our nation for the centuries before and the century after 1915. But as tragic as the past has been, and as bleak as the future may appear, we must know that our nation stands the most secure now than it ever has in its history; never has there been a better opportunity for such an extensive

project of revitalisation to take place to begin to undo the centuries of hardship we have experienced. It comes back to the old trope that 'success is the best revenge'; all we can do is show our adversaries, both historical and contemporary, that the spirit of the Armenian people is not defeated, and that we will never surrender.

For more information about AAV:

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