



# Sustainable transformation in Armenia



**LOCATION:** Programmes in Armenia



**PROJECT NAME:** Sisian and Alaverdi Area Programmes



**GOAL:** Sustained wellbeing of children, especially the most vulnerable, within families living in Alaverdi and Sisian communities in Armenia (2004 – 2020)



## Overview

Armenia was considered a success story among the transitioning economies following its secession from the Soviet Union in 1991. However, many services and institutions collapsed during the transition which created a sense of nostalgia for the old state's efficiency, combined with a feeling of hopelessness.

The 2008 global crisis hit the country harshly, and the education, health and social protection sectors have remained in decline, while communities have lived under the cloud of ongoing political crisis over the disputed territory of the Nagorno Karabakh region. At the start of our work in Armenia, 50.9% of the population was classified as either poor or very poor.<sup>1</sup>

### BARRIERS TO CHILD WELLBEING IN SISIAN AND ALAVERDI

Economic underdevelopment and lack of local opportunities for young people led to low incomes. According to 2011 government statistics on Lori

(the region where Alaverdi is located), 45.9% of the population was categorised as poor, with 28.6% very poor and 5.2% extremely poor. At the start of the Sisian programme, the unemployment rate in the region was estimated to be around 80%.<sup>2</sup>

There was a lack of preschool facilities, little training on positive, child-centred teaching methods and few extracurricular activities. Health services were poor quality and there was little awareness on child development and positive parenting.

### World Vision's response

Since 2004, we have reached many families living in rural communities in the Sisian and Alaverdi regions, focusing on child protection, participation, health and education, supporting and enabling communities to advocate for their rights, and facilitating conversations between community members and decision makers, with an increasing focus on championing the most vulnerable families.

# RESULTS

## Healthcare

We started by focusing on the rehabilitation of healthcare facilities and providing mobile outreach health services. We then moved towards more innovative, sustainable solutions which build capacity in services and can remain in place after we leave. This included training staff at Healthcare Units to lead information sessions for parents of children under five years. Local healthcare workers now run these sessions independently. Improving health also included raising people's awareness of their entitlements, through our Citizens Voice and Action model.<sup>3</sup> This brings service providers and users together, to improve the supply and demand for quality services.

### THE RESULTS

The 2012 Sisian evaluation reported that 75% of mothers we asked reported an improved quality of care from both doctors and nurses between 2005 and 2012. The same proportion said, in 2012, that the care they received from doctors and nurses was good or very good. In addition, the

proportion of women receiving post-natal visits by a trained health professional (within seven days of childbirth) was 10% in 2004, rising to 87% in 2012.

**“We were not aware of state entitlements in the area of health ... Now everyone is aware and old stereotypes have gone away. There are many cases when individuals become defenders of their own rights.”** A mother from Alaverdi shared.



**ABOVE:** Dr Zaruhi with some of her patients. “World Vision organised our refresher courses right in Sisian area, but with the same high-level professionals coming from the renowned hospitals of the capital Yerevan,” says Dr Zaruhi.

<sup>1</sup>Social Snapshot and Poverty in Armenia, Statistical Analytical Report, page 132, Yerevan 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Northern Syunik (Sisian) Area Development Programme Start-Up Proposal, 2003, page 3.

<sup>3</sup>LCVA project model – [wvi.org/social-accountability/our-approach](http://wvi.org/social-accountability/our-approach)

## Education

The journey to ensure that all children in Sisian and Alaverdi can access a quality education, followed a similar pattern. While we gave some material support, providing computers, equipment and interactive resources, the key highlight was ensuring the community themselves could own the change they wanted to see. The provision of high-quality pre-school education came through equipping community leaders, parents and teachers to work with local authorities; planning, fundraising and implementing together.

Pre-school, primary and secondary school teachers were trained in inclusive, child-centred education. Students and parents became more involved in their schools' running and crucially, the various extracurricular clubs and activities have promoted inclusion and acceptance of all children, regardless of background or disability.

### THE RESULTS

In 2004 there were just eight kindergartens in Sisian, but through World Vision, 13 more have been established, helping provide a safe and educational space for young children. All 21 have been improved through rebuilding, creating playgrounds, training staff, and equipped with furniture. In Alaverdi, we renovated eight kindergartens and established six new ones. All are now considered satisfactory or higher by peer and expert review, (compared to only 13% in Sisian five years earlier).

After one phase of the programme in Sisian, 84% of caregivers with school-aged children were satisfied with their child's school and believed it was fulfilling its role. Similarly, improvements were noted in Alaverdi where there was a 66% drop in the number of children excluded from mainstream education between 2008 and 2012.

Children's clubs catering to different age ranges have also been established. By 2019, over 2,000 children in Sisian and Alaverdi were attending clubs, and by 2020 they were being run by the community themselves. This is a giant leap in the direction of self-sufficiency after we have left.

The Peace Road club of Sisian Town organises various activities in their communities encouraging other children to join. They also learned how to prevent bullying.

**“In Peace Road club I learnt many logic games, and how to care about one another. We also discussed bullying, and violence in our community,”** says Nare, 14, one of the club members.

According to the Programmes' final evaluations, children's voices and opinions are respected and valued, and they're now participating more in decisions that affect their lives. As one healthcare worker told us: **“Relationships are changed in the community. Not only do adults listen more to children and youth, but children influence the adults' behaviour. For example, there is a community centre ... A few years ago, children printed 'no smoking' signs and put them all over the walls of the big meeting room. The signs are not there anymore, but it has become an unwritten rule for adults, and no one smokes inside.”**



**RIGHT:** Arsham, 4, enjoys his time at kindergarten. **BELOW:** Peace Road Club members standing in front of their community school in Sisan, South of Armenia. The members of the club learn about child rights, develop analytical thinking and gain communications skills.



## Economic development

We've used our Graduation Project Model to help the most vulnerable families and farmers to improve their incomes. Alongside this, we have helped add value to local businesses including introducing new farming techniques, food collection and storage points, supporting new businesses in tourism and helping add value to raspberry production and distribution.

## THE RESULTS

The final evaluation in Sisian found that the average monthly income for a farming family has risen from \$45 to \$63 per month, and two-thirds of farmers reported an income increase of at least 10% after taking part in World Vision training. More than 300 of the poorest people in the region have joined producer groups, now with four times more productive land compared to three years ago. Profits from these groups are used not only to provide for members' own families, but also to help the most vulnerable children in the community.

## Child protection

To address child protection issues successfully, we brought together social workers, faith leaders, parents and caregivers, pre-school and school staff, health workers and the police, in a variety of ways.

Our 'Celebrating Families' model supports the most vulnerable households. Through bringing together faith leaders and social workers, families are encouraged, offered counselling and mental health support, and helped to form healthier family relationships. Parents and caregivers receive guidance on avoiding harsh disciplining practices, as well as recognising and reporting signs of abuse. Overall, incidences of child abuse and neglect have reduced.

Outside of the family, pre-school staff took training on inclusive education, creating a positive environment to stimulate young children's development and positive disciplining methods. Many groups have worked together to understand child protection risks and issues and how to respond to incidents.

## THE RESULTS

In Alaverdi, 59% of fathers with children under-five now promote their child's development at home such as reading or playing with children. We've also seen a 25% fall in caregivers using physical or emotional violence as a method of child discipline; a positive change that has continued despite the challenges of COVID-19.

Another highlight has been the support that the most vulnerable families can now get through dedicated social workers. As one parent told us:

**"My child has a developmental issue and kindergarten was not accepting him. Due to World Vision social worker engagement, it turned out that my child can go to kindergarten and now he is attending together with all children."**

In Sisian, we supported the introduction of the Community Social Workers' Institute to ensure training and support continues. Through tremendous efforts made by World Vision Armenia staff mean that local law now requires all communities in Armenia with a population of over 5,000 to have a dedicated social worker. We're continuing to work alongside the Government of Armenia to ensure these social workers continue to build the resilience of the most vulnerable families.



ABOVE: Garnos leading a children's club session. BELOW: Garnos with his family.



ABOVE: Nare, 7, and Ani, 10, with their mother Silva at their family house in Alaverdi, Armenia. Silva and her husband Ararat used to be unemployed, due to lack of employment opportunities, until World Vision provided sheep for them to generate income and social workers helped Silva get a job as a cleaner. "I was so happy that we were having regular income. First, we bought wood to heat the house in winter. With every new kilo of cheese sold and every salary I was buying school items, warm quality shoes and clothes for my kids, because I wanted them to be happy to feel that we love and care about them", says Silva.

## Garnos' story

16-year-old Garnos' life has been transformed by the work in his community. After his father left, Garnos' mother struggled to support her four boys. We introduced the family to a dedicated social worker, who helped them access services including education and healthcare. Garnos' mum also took training in positive parenting, problem-solving and managing household finances. And, alongside all this, they were given new farming equipment and seeds/seedlings so that they can use their small plot of land to grow crops for themselves and to sell.

While Garnos' homelife has improved, he's also gained confidence in himself thanks to the children's club. In fact, he's become a group leader, motivating other young people

**"There are many families in the world like us. We can't help everyone but each of us can help someone in the world. I am happy that our family is one of the families who had a helping hand. Kindness makes change."**





**ABOVE:** World Vision staff members and community social workers meet with extremely poor families in rural communities in Armenia to provide packages of essential food and hygiene items, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They also educate on the importance of staying home and regularly washing hands with soap.

## What have we learnt?

### CHANGES SEEN BY WORLD VISION STAFF

“There has been a big attitude change on child wellbeing among local groups and families. Resilience is also one of our major achievements, along with the active participation of youth. Mind and attitude change is World Vision’s long-term contribution. As a result of our work with local government and communities, bodies responsible for child protection (government and non-government) became more proactive. Referral and decision-making mechanisms started to work, even without our intervention or involvement in some cases.” (Aregnazan Martirosyan, Alaverdi Area Programme Manager)

## INTO THE FUTURE

Recently COVID-19 has been a big challenge and there is still work to do. But we are confident that the remaining challenges will be solved through local fundraising efforts and bilateral grants, as we have left behind strong, resilient communities. The local organisations are equipped with tested and successful project models to build on, adapt and replicate for ongoing work in their communities.

World Vision Armenia is becoming fully self-funding through local Child Sponsorship, fundraising within the country and acquiring their own grants, and will no longer need funding from World Vision UK. We are proud to have been part of this journey in Armenia.

## World Vision UK

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At World Vision, our focus is on helping the most vulnerable children, in the most dangerous places, overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian faith, we’ve worked together with communities, partners, local leaders and governments, for over 70 years, so that children – of all faiths and none – are empowered to experience fullness of life. World Vision UK is a registered charity no. 285908, a company limited by guarantee and registered in England no. 1675552. Registered office as above.

**COVER:** Olya, 7, from the Sisian area in Armenia. World Vision supported her family to overcome extreme poverty by helping them to establish a small bee-keeping business. All photos: © 2019/2020 World Vision