



## « CREATING SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENTS IN THE KASHATAKH DISTRICT »

Kashatak, Armenia

*Period of implementation: 2003 (launch) | Study case written in 2010*

In the early 1990s, as a result of the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, many civilians had to leave their houses and move to the Kashatak region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The internally displaced people have managed to regulate their lives. The *Menq* Union for Farmers' Mutual Aid established in 2003 has been among the first to provide systemized and coordinated support to the settlers of the rural areas in the Kashatak region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The 'Handover' pilot project implemented among the settlers in Nagorno-Karabakh aims to assist newly settled households and relieve the settlers' hardships connected with housing, establishing farms, and developing stable sources of income. During seven years of operation, it has proven to be a successful social entrepreneur through its 'handover' funding-regenerating projects on cattle-breeding, apiculture, and poultry farming. The union has provided more than 50 families in various villages with a regular means of income, and has coordinated the development of apiculture. At present, six families' main occupation is honey-bee keeping.



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *Regional context*

The total territory of Kashatakh region is 3,377 m<sup>2</sup>, with a population of around 9,763 according to the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) census conducted in 2005. The regional center is the town of Berdzor, where the local self-governance bodies reside. The main state institutions located in the town are local governance body offices, the police, post offices, a hospital, schools, libraries, etc.

There have been two main demographic waves in recent decades in Kashatakh: first, the migration of refugees who were forced from their native area during the Karabakh conflict, mostly in 1993; and second, an urban to rural inflow of people as a result of the economic crisis and social hardship people faced in urban areas. This project was developed for the farmer-refugees in the rural areas of the region, whose main occupations are agriculture, cattle-breeding, and apiculture.

### *Government and decentralization context*

The Kashatakh region is one of the seven administrative units of Nagorno-Karabakh. The central government agencies are located in Stepanakert, the capital, while regions are run by local governance agencies, elected in a popular vote by the population of each administrative unit.

Despite the centralized government system, a major part of Kashatakh region, due to the natural conditions, limited resources, and non-restored infrastructure, is quite poorly connected with the rest of the country. Regular buses from the capital to the distant towns and villages and back started operating only a year ago and seasonal factors play a key role, with the regularity of transport communication greatly dependent on weather conditions. The local population does not get much support from the government and is mainly left on their own to solve both communal and social problems, including shortages of electricity and water in some villages. Most of such villages are located in naturally hard-to-reach mountain areas with poor infrastructure.

**Institutional level of policy development:** Communal and Inter-communal

### *Social context*

According to the 2005 national census conducted in Nagorno-Karabakh, only 1227 out of the total population of the Kashatakh region, 9763 people, were born in the Kashatakh region, and 1204 of this locally born population were children in the 0-9 age group (Table 6-3, Census 2005 of Nagorno-Karabakh).

The social issues that exist in the Kashatakh region are common to the majority of the local population. In general, there is no polarization of social conditions observed in the area. Social issues usually prioritize the availability of housing. Differences in living levels are generally conditioned by the length of time the settlers have lived in the area. The first wave of the local population to move to the region in early 1990s, that is, the old settlers, have managed to establish more sustainable households and farms with a more or less regular income. Meanwhile, the new settlers are still adapting themselves to the natural and social difficulties. In general, these differences also depend on the distance of the community from the regional center and/or passable roads and operating infrastructures.

## Policy development

The *Menq* Union for Farmers' Mutual Aid (UFMA) was established in 2003 to support the Kashatakh settlers in establishing households and to help them overcome hardships. UFMA *Menq* is a non-governmental organization that unites efforts to support and assist the settlers in establishing their households and make a living through mutual aid among the farmers. The union has 15 founder-members, including the chairman. The founders approved the 'Handover' pilot project of aid to the farmers and agreed on establishing the union. Although it has limited resources, the organization operates in several villages of the region and seeks to assist as many families as possible.

Tigran Kyureghyan, chairman of the union, moved to Kashatakh in 1993 with the first settlers and since then has established seven villages. As a result of armed conflict in the region, most settlements were either fully or partly destroyed. Refugees that moved to the Kashatakh and Karvajar regions remained without shelters. Initially, they had to settle in destroyed and ruined houses. After the ceasefire regime was established, people started re-establishing villages and communities and Tigran Kyureghyan was among them. He coordinated the settlement of families in communities and helped form local administrations and schools (i.e., coordinated the settling of specialists at particular villages to teach various subjects). These villages are: Haytagh, Gahanist, and Aghbradzor in the Kashatakh region and Zuar, Tutkhun, Zarkuni, Jumen, and Havakhghats in the neighbouring Karvajar region. The largest village, Zuar, was the first to be established and fully formed in 1997. At present, the village has 23 families. In 1998, the Zuar secondary school opened with 20 students.

The UFMA initiative is entirely based on civil contributions and has no government support. The union operates thanks to private donations. The spectrum of activities of the *Menq* union includes housing assistance, the establishment of the refugees' households and farms, and the demographic support project (lump sum payments for each newborn child in the family).

## Background

The UFMA *Menq* was created to assist the refugees to settle in the new territories. These people who had lost their homes underwent serious stresses and, in the initial period, were unable to coordinate efforts to establish new households almost from nothing. The *Menq* union was formed particularly to relieve the refugees' housing and settlement problems. Although the issue of shelter for the initial period of settlement was more or less resolved – people mainly moved into the semi-ruined houses – the problem of making a living required additional support and coordination. The UFMA *Menq* was established to address the problems.

The idea of UFMA *Menq* is based on a regenerating funding approach and is a model of social entrepreneurship. The principle of 'handover' underlies most of the farmers' aid programs the union implements. Under the 'Golden bull-calf' project, for instance, the union provides two cows per family for two years' period. The beneficiary family gives the first born calf back to the union. In addition, the beneficiaries provide advice and help to the next beneficiaries of the project. The same scheme is applicable for sheep, goat, and hog breeding and honey bee-keeping. As a result of this simple scheme, the families not only get assistance in stock-breeding, which provides them with daily dairy and meat products, but also receive a regular income through the sale of meat and dairy products. Although its main niches are cattle-breeding and apiculture, the union has provided some quantity of poultry as well.

The effectiveness of the practice can be observed through the project's continuity and the number of the families it has been assisting since 2003: according to data provided by *Menq*, the union has assisted more than 50 families in various villages of the area (*Menq* reports).

### *Policy goals*

The main objectives of the policy are to assist the refugees in the poorly populated areas of the country, through solving housing issues, establishing households, and providing a regular means of income for the families. Social aid is also among the primary objectives. New families formed in the villages among the settlers (i.e. through marriages and births), 'inherit' the same spectrum of problems and issues as their parents' families. Though demographic issues are not the primary goal of UFMA *Menq*, the union provides assistance to the newly formed families in the form of a lump sum fixed payment for newborn children.

Both the number of project beneficiaries and the geographic scope of the project have increased steadily. The UFMA *Menq* began by offering help to 15 families at a time; now, it has the resources to include 47 families at a time in one of its handover projects.

The union's policy approach to the beneficiaries differs depending on the type of problems to be addressed. For instance, the cattle breeding project is regarded as primary compared with the bee-keeping, since the first provides necessary daily food products, while bee-keeping is regarded as an additional source of income. Thus, those settlers who are facing difficulties in setting up their household will primarily be included in the 'Golden bull-calf', goat, and sheep breeding project and not bee-keeping. However, the older settlers have passed through the earlier stages of aid and, at a certain point, they will need to diversify their household, for example, through bee-keeping.

### *Chronological development*

When it was established in Kashatak in 2003, the *Menq* Union for Farmers' Mutual Aid had 15 members. It is a non-governmental organization that aims to assist settlers in the Kashatak rural areas. The initial resources of the union (in 2003) amounted to AMD 800,000 (approximately U.S.\$2,000).

Union membership is open to every person interested in supporting the farmers' mutual aid projects. Members pay an enrolment fee and a monthly membership fee to the union. Members are encouraged to design innovative projects and submit proposals to the chairman for final consideration. For instance, for the past two years, union members, in cooperation with active citizens and volunteers from various social networks, have been collecting books for school libraries of the villages and have been fundraising to obtain books, school stationery, and sporting items for the schools in the region.

This wider social and volunteer inclusion has raised public awareness and, within a year of active involvement, over 2,000 books for the school libraries, 3 school items, 150 sport items, and AMD 280,000 (U.S.\$700) has been raised to address various problems of the identified group of most vulnerable families.

### *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

#### **Agents involved**

The *Menq* Union for Farmers' Mutual Aid is an NGO. The schemes of farmers' mutual aid programs have been developed and approved by the 15 founders and implemented mainly by the union with the direct participation and permanent supervision of the chairman of the union. The

participation of government agencies has not been recorded. Young people in civil society actively participate and are involved in the project through personal/private donations, volunteering, and offering fundraising assistance.

For instance, the fundraising activities are conducted in the following way. The UFMA *Menq*, being well aware of the situation in the villages of the regions where it operates, provides information about the needs of schools there. First of all, the goal is set, for example, to buy and collect books for schools in the villages of Haytagh, Gahanist, and Aghbradzor in the region of Kashatak. One activist from a popular social network (e.g., Facebook, or other forums or blogs) is appointed as the person who collects money, while another one is responsible for the collection of books. The information is circulated in the social networks for a fixed period of time. Such an approach allows people with various capabilities to participate in the initiative – those who can afford financial participation can give money, those who cannot may contribute their own books. Afterwards, when the collected books and items are taken to the schools, the participants publish reports with photos and detailed information on the funds raised, the books and items purchased, and the schools and villages that benefited from the action. This approach has proven to be effective, since people visually see the results of their participation. It has also proven to be very inspiring and involves more people each time.

### **Beneficiaries**

The primary beneficiaries of the projects are the refugees and settlers moving from urban areas. Due to the continuing economic recession in the urban areas, increases in the prices of consumer products, and a lack of jobs, some families suffer hardships and prefer to move to villages to make a living through agriculture. Although it is difficult during the initial period, when they adapt themselves to the rural life, making a living becomes more realistic than living in the towns without jobs or with low wages.

Usually people move to the region with families. They face problems related to housing, establishing households and farms, and educating their children. Often, small settlements do not have own schools and the children face the problem of reaching the neighbouring villages to attend school. The local authorities often address similar problems by providing transportation for the children to travel to the neighbouring villages for school.

By being included in one of the projects, people are able to solve key issues connected with their living situation, minimum income, and occupation, and they have the opportunity to sell dairy and meat products to regular consumers.

### **Participation processes implemented**

The organizational structure of the *Menq* Union for Farmers' Mutual Aid has 15 founding members including the Chairman and regular members.

Tigran Kyureghyan is the founding Chairman of the Union. He is the initiator of the projects and their main executor. Since he knows the settlers in the area, he is well aware of the needs and abilities of each of the project beneficiaries.

Currently, the union has 30 members. Membership in the union provides the members with the authority to call a meeting to determine issues and decide policies to address particular issues. Members are eligible to propose projects and to seek and involve more people and funds in existing and proposed projects. The members' involvement is fully volunteer, and no remuneration or salaries compensate their participation.

Regular meetings are called once every six months, in early spring and early autumn, to consider the overall activities of the union within the past months, progresses and problems to be addressed, the implementation of the projects, and the productivity of the farmers within project activities/works. Decisions are usually made by consensus, although certain issues may be brought to vote.

Meetings with the chairman of the union are occasionally organized by volunteer activists. Online interviews and discussions with Tigran Kyureghyan are organized in the e-newsletters and forums<sup>1</sup> – the most interested layer of the society is actively following via online means of communication.

Non-member volunteers participate in project implementation as well. They mainly organize fundraising and the transportation and delivery of community donations.

Most activists are 'middle class', mainly employed by local or international organizations with fixed incomes and do not own businesses. The projects they assist are small or medium-scale. More settlers' issues could be addressed with more tangible funds/donations.

## *Institutionalization and financing*

### **Institutionalization processes**

Due to limited resources, the UFMA *Menq* has not been able to develop its own website, which could secure greater awareness of the project and solicit online donations. Although the union is not officially represented in social networks, volunteers do their utmost to increase awareness through online media ([www.hetq.am](http://www.hetq.am)), forums ([www.forum.hayastan.com](http://www.forum.hayastan.com) and [www.openarmenia.com](http://www.openarmenia.com)), and personal blogs. The union currently seeks volunteer web designers to develop an improved web presence for the NGO.

### **Financing**

The UFMA *Menq* started with U.S.\$2,000 initial capital donated by its founding members. From the very beginning, the project was able to include 15 families and provide two heads of cattle (two cows) to each. Thanks to its professional approach, the Union has managed to provide steadily increasing resources and, at present, 47 families at a time are included in the aid programs.

The Union has 20 members that make monthly membership payments. At present, the membership fees comprise the main source of revenue for the organization, which, though regular, are not significant. Thus, despite the regular membership dues, the union is not able to conduct large-scale projects at present due to limited funds.

Donations like books and school items, while useful and needed by the communities, cannot be considered as relief for the union's main projects, since they are more directed to helping children and families in education. Nevertheless, as a result of a volunteer action about two years ago, some chicken were donated to several households for poultry development. However, as a limited-scale action, this had little effect on the total situation of the area.

## **Outcomes and reflections**

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<sup>1</sup> For example, [hetq.am](http://hetq.am), [openarmenia.com](http://openarmenia.com), and [forum.hayastan.com](http://forum.hayastan.com).

## Key results and achievements

Within its seven years of operation, the union has supported the establishment of more than 50 households that have succeeded in providing themselves with regular income. Through livestock breeding projects, the union has provided over 100 heads of cattle, 70 calves and bulls, and 50 pigs. The union has also provided poultry (chicken, ducks, turkeys, and geese), as well as some horses. At least 30 families have managed to establish their own cattle-breeding.

Significant progress has been recorded in the apiculture promotion project. More than 3000 kg of high-quality honey is produced annually by around 200 honey bee colonies in the northern communities of Kashatakh region. Honey production is the main occupation of at least 6 households. The union has even developed a brand name for the honey – ‘*Qari meghr*’, which translates as ‘Stone honey’ and refers to the mountainous landscape of the region.

The policy of farmers’ mutual aid proves to be successfully operating primarily thanks to the sincere dedication and commitment of the parties involved. It can be regarded as a vivid example of community contribution to the development of a region. Despite the failure of the government to address their problems, cooperatively the settlers managed to overcome quite large-scale difficulties through mutual aid and care, under the coordination of *Menq* and with the active participation of individuals in the community. Over 50 families have benefited from the project, testifying to the policy’s effectiveness.

Nevertheless, limited funds and human resources remain the main challenges for the local communities. The region is just emerging as an institutionalized community. A growing population will contribute to strengthening the active communities in the villages and human flows, and to rehabilitating the region. Most donors work with regions close to the capital, where the main population lives, while the settlers of the Kashatakh region are to some extent left on their own and enjoy only limited support from philanthropic donations and similar initiatives.

Overall, the experience shows that the more the people are occupied with addressing their routine problems, the less they are involved in the civic life of the community. For instance, only a few settlers run for the local governance office and are rarely elected. This can partly be explained by the hardships involved in setting up their own households and addressing daily hardships. If people in the region had fewer problems connected with making a daily living, they could be more active in regional governance and other civic engagement forms, such as being elected to various positions at agencies, regional administration, council of aldermen, etc. Under the present circumstances, the urban population is more active in government than the settlers in the villages.

## Main obstacles

The main obstacles have been:

**Infrastructure:** Infrastructure in the Kashatakh region is poorly maintained. Some houses do not have a basic electricity supply. There are villages with limited or no water resources as well.

- **Financial:** At present, the farmers’ mutual aid union has little funding, as a result of which its aid to the farmers grows thinner and the union is unable to initiate other projects, like horticulture development, poultry farm development, etc.
- **Natural and weather conditions:** The region is known for its tough landscape, hard-to-reach areas, and harsh climate conditions.

- Cattle diseases, which can cause a loss of the cattle within the project. Veterinary services are not voluntary, and either the union or the farmers have to compensate the veterinarians. In such cases, the union is the primary loser, as it is deprived of its 'capital'. Depending on the circumstances, such as a careless attitude or failure to follow the instructions of animal breeding provided by the union and/or the previous beneficiary, the farmer can be excluded from the list of beneficiaries of the project.

### Overall assessment and replicability

#### Pre-requisites

The territory of Kashatakh region is quite large at 3,377 km<sup>2</sup>, with diverse natural and climate conditions. The southern part of the region has a mild climate and is well suitable for agriculture development of various types. In spite of this fact, huge agriculture territories are not utilized properly. The successful operation of *Menq* UFMA in the northern and central areas of Kashatakh shows that the successes can be replicated in the southern areas as well.

#### Recommendations

Apart from livestock breeding and apiculture, due to the favourable climate conditions, people in the southern areas are involved in horticulture to grow many varieties of fruits and legumes. The seven years of the farmers' mutual aid project attests to the success of combining a practical approach, analytical thinking, and dedication.

### Further information

This case was researched and written by Tigran Kocharyan, Yerevan, Armenia, in December 2010, under the supervision of Dr. Giovanni Allegretti at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal, in 2010.

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