



Three models of Armenian  
community based  
organisations and their  
development through  
the "Learning by doing"  
approach

Currently, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in Armenia are facing many challenges and serious organizational limitations. United to address specific problems in their communities, the members of CBOs in most instances have a low level of awareness and are not conversant with the legal implications and procedures of running an organisation. Sometimes community groups remain unregistered, which prevents them from receiving funds from most international and local donors. CBOs in Armenia either fail to register at all, or register as NGOs. Development agencies bestow grants to the better-established NGOs that have the capacity to implement projects because of the anticipated know-how. Although activities of CBOs receive great appreciation from community members, they are not getting the recognition they deserve from Armenian civil society organizations.

To remedy this inappropriate situation, within the project ‘Learning by doing: Practice-oriented V4 support for strengthening civil society in the Caucasus’ supported by the International Visegrad Fund, three local Armenian CBOs in regional towns were awarded for developing their ideas and organisations: “Pulse of Community” from Vardenik, the Independent Experts Association (IEA) from Vanadzor, and Regional Partnership and Development Centre (RDPC) from Yeghegnadzor. Pulse of Community is a needs-based bottom-up “community developer-initiator”, IEA is a CBO with “movement potential”, while RDPC as a spin-off of donor-supported youth bank project is the most trained and prepared as a “community corrective of local policies”. To various degrees, and through different models, all three organisations work as CBOs in their focus on solving local issues with the active involvement of their local communities.

## From community developers, movement builders to social policy correctives: organizational functions, profiles and challenges of the CBOs

Although registered as an NGO, “Pulse of Community” is a good example of a community-based organization for Armenia. Members of the organization build up their operation based on the needs of the Vardenik community, involve local businesses and build good relations with local self-governing bodies, both with the community and the municipality. They do not have a long term strategy and their activities are more ad hoc, however, the results of their work are obvious for the community who find the results are useful and relevant to their needs. The leadership of the organization has relatively weak knowledge and skills on organizational development, strategy and policy formulation or/and democratic principles but has a clear vision of needs and potential benefits for Vardenik.

The village is suffering from a loss of labour force – adults are travelling for work to Yerevan, Russia etc. The young generation also has tendencies to leave the village and move to bigger cities or even abroad, e.g. they do not want to come back after finishing their studies. The NGO is oriented not only on youth but also on serving the entire community. Together with the youth involved, they constantly follow the needs of the local community and develop their activities accordingly, including cleaning road and surrounding areas and organizing youth activities.

The level of trust and interaction among the NGO, the local government and community members is refreshing. The NGO always presents the plans and results of their work

to the community and local self-governing bodies (representatives of Vardenik community municipality); in turn, members of the community participate in the events planned by the organization. The NGO has already implemented several projects, including opening a cinema theatre, dance club, and awarding sponsors of community activities. The project idea of establishing a youth club is one of the possibilities



to effectively use already available premises, a cinema theatre, or meeting rooms in the newly reconstructed “Culture house”. In addition, the project also offers an opportunity to increase and strengthen the youth community base within the organization.

Although it was established with a business focus, the Independent Experts Association (IEA) is another excellent example of the organization that follows and reacts to the changing needs and challenges of the social environment. “Currently we live in the stage of serious social, political, economic and public transformations and changes in Armenia. Comparing with Yerevan, the local regional public and political life is perhaps not so vivid and full of changes, but we observe them and respond to all important events and movements,” says Koryun Shekoyan, the head of the Association. Most of the activities IEA undertakes are in Vanadzor and surrounding communities, but the goals and mission of the Association are more ambitious and are not limited by geographical location.

Recently, the Association took part in the national movement against increasing pub-

lic transportation costs. It was also involved in an ecological movement: to prevent possible ecological damage, it protested against newly opened copper mines in the region. In the last year, the NGO initiated city discussions about the cleanliness of Vanadzor city and participated in round table discussions on ways to address and tackle corruption. During the last year, IEA gained good practices in sharing important information and experience among local NGOs, and now it expands its community basis. The Association is active in a region where families suffer from economic hardship and live according to strong patriarchal traditions. The resulting low education levels have many negative consequences. Among these, it is especially striking the little knowledge young women have about risks of pregnancy and delivery and their lack of expert advice or group support when facing pressure from wider family to undergo abortion when pregnant with a girl. Awarded with a project prize in the ‘Learning by doing project’, the Association sets to address this problem. IEA’s awarded project has two main goals: to reduce selective abortions of girls through increasing awareness of this issue and to provide ways to maintain pregnancy health.

The Regional Partnership and Development Centre (RDPC) is located in Yeghegnadzor. This organization sits on the opposite side of the spectrum, and resembles a more classic NGO but with a very important function. RDPC works closely with regional and local authorities, and aims to detect and fill gaps in the operation of local governments. It identifies pressing social needs and helps authorities in designing good strategies, also with their own action.

“We follow all changes in the Armenian political and economic environment, however, we try to concentrate more on local needs since we think that small things done locally contribute to global development,” says Narek Beglaryan, the head of organization. The RDPC is actively involved in the meetings and work-

shops held by the regional council consisting of regional and local government officials discussing regional and local development strategies, budget planning and implementation, as well as meetings with national officials visiting the region.

The RDPC usually undertakes need assessments in the local social environment within the framework of projects implemented with the financial support of donor organizations. One recent example was participation in the budget planning in Aghnjadzor community. The RDPC questioned the community members and identified a need for child and youth

activities. As a result of the survey, they suggested the opening of a child development centre and helped community mayor to identify the facility and allocate funds to pay salaries to educators. Another example relates to the recent RA Government decree on requirements for kindergartens. The NGO helped the Agarakadzor community to revise the budget expenditures and allocate one third of the community budget to reconstruct and enhance the community kindergarten. Currently the RDPC is well known, and local self-governing bodies are very supportive, and appreciate the help which comes from the RDPC.

## Recent changes in Organizational strategies and project implementation

Members of “Pulse of Community” have not only regular needs assessment meetings in the broader community of Vardenik, but their priorities are flexible, and can respond to the most urgent needs of the community. According to the opinion of Artush Khachatryan, involving young people in community initiatives enables the youth to take more responsibility and to work more independently. So, with this IVF award they decided to establish a youth club as a part of the organization, which will focus more on the activities and engagement of youth and schoolchildren. After participating in trainings on decision-making and management, the involved youth would be included on the board, set objectives and develop plans of action for the youth club till the end of 2015.

The project has been implemented in a more participatory way: the head of the organization delegated more responsibilities to young people. After training, the organization makes them responsible for the activities of the youth club. For the young people involved it was inspiring to meet with international experts and receive their attention and support. Indeed,

the outcome was that the youth felt more responsible for what they were doing and participated more actively in the life of the organization. On Mothers’ Day, on behalf of the organization’s newly established dance school, the young members of Pulse of Community planned and implemented a performance well attended, especially by female members of the local community.



In the long-term, the creation and management of social enterprises such as a dance school and a cinema could make the Pulse of Community sustainable. The organization



is set to think on lines of financial sustainability and link entrepreneurial activities with social functions. This decision was made thanks to the IVF award, during the “Learning by doing” project. Previously Pulse of Community planned separate activities, but now they make conscious efforts to put these together, and thus achieve a more major aim. In addition to raising money for their activities via managing cinema and dance classes, young people are trying to solve other problems.

One of the first activities of the newly formed youth club was the development of an action plan for 2015. One important activity showed that members of Youth Club are really concerned about the future of the community: they planned and conducted a survey among community members on “measures that will help to keep youth in the community”.

Within the awarded project to reduce the number selective abortions based on fetal gender, the Independent Experts Association planned and implemented public awareness actions. IEA applied those techniques for public influence they had used before, including TV programs, printing materials, and articles in local mass media. This activity was a radical novelty for the organization, as making public service advertisements was something completely new for the Association. Members of IEA were trying to find the most influential story for

that public service announcement. Moreover, the main topic of the project was also new for the Association, which implied more intensive collaboration with professionals from the field of prenatal care, gynaecology, and psychology.

Compared to earlier projects, IEA’s actions were more public, especially those actions involving the media. For the first time, IEA developed evaluation criteria for assessing the project impact. The IEA found the task to find and develop some real, strong evaluation criteria, to assess how the project influenced local society a novel and challenging exercise.

During the project implementation, IEA noticed that the development of their organization is strongly interconnected with the social environment and its actors. IEA set forth to strengthen the CBO’s experience and capability, with the cooperation and collaboration with other regional NGOs, and thus to support and sustain democratic and public development processes. The RDPC plans are currently based on national, regional and local development plans developed by local and regional governments. The goal is particularly to complement and assist the implementation of these plans while avoiding overlap as much as possible. The main focus of the organization’s activities is twofold: one is strengthening youth and the other is infrastructure development. The awarded project was aimed at increasing youth involvement and



strengthening and empowering those involved, as well as supporting their creative thinking for tourism development in their region. After participation in the workshops, the young people involved conducted on-line research on European and Georgian good practices, visited the local small and medium companies that provide tourism, hospitality and related services to identify development needs and opportunities. Finally, the young participants came up with ideas for tourism development initiatives.

Usually in such projects i.e. activation of youth in tourism development, the RDPC empowers young people to implement projects themselves. This time, however, RDPC was a direct organizer and implementer of some project activities. This provided the organization with ideas on how to strengthen and intensify work with youth in the future, and how to work more closely with project beneficiaries. This was new experience for the

youth involved in this project too; they were the initiators and presenters of the ideas and approaches in tourism development, a task requiring responsibility.

Instead of focusing on broad goals and programs, RDPC increasingly stresses small projects and activities that can later result in the achievement of mid and long term goals. The organization experimented with and found a new effective way of project management: RDPC used online platforms in the course of project implementation for the very first time.

There are some changes in the youth empowerment plans. Previously RDPC judged trainings and workshops as sufficient for development projects, including collecting a group of interested youth. More recently, the organization added informal elements to project activities but with more social impact, like organization of study visits or excursions and/or hiking tours.

## Conclusion

In general, all three awarded organizations recorded unexpected benefits from their projects, which indicate capacities and prospects for organizational development and future actions. The image of the “Pulse of Community” NGO in Vardenik community strengthened as a result of the implemented project and “international interest and support” toward its activities. The awarded project increased the Independent Experts Association experience in organising public awareness actions, made the Association more noticeable in the local community, as well as established and/or activated links with other local partners and stakeholders. The IEA expected involvement of local gynaecologists and physicians, but they received positive feedback from other stakeholders too, including local and regional health care authorities, social and human rights NGO representatives, family care social workers, etc.

Finally, the RDPC worked more closely and in a more in-depth manner with the project beneficiaries, which they find very helpful and an interesting and novel focus for future work.

All three organizations show a great interest toward the transfer of good practices for community-based organizations, their sources of funding and cooperation with local government. Nevertheless, representatives of these organizations emphasize the critical need for further education related to the European experience of community development actions, projects, tactics and strategies on the local level. They also require consulting support and co-funding for community-based small projects. As the story of these three CBOs indicate, they certainly have the potential for further development.