

Connecting the Dots: Project hopes to make Karakert village a model of success

by John Hughes

From a rosy monochrome television screen in the corner of a crumbling room a music video is the entertainment for a crumbling family gathered on one bed in another corner.



KAREN MIRZOYAN/ARMENIANOW.COM

The Baghoyan family is among those in need of COAF's project.

"Baby if you give it to me, I'll give it to you. I know what you want, you know I got it," sing Busta Rhymes and Mariah Carey.

In this Karakert village home that couldn't be farther from the world on that screen, it is hard to imagine that this life is anything anybody would want. Six children, including a four year old with a pulmonary illness, live here. The father left for Russia; the mother and kids aren't leaving for anywhere.

Mary, 17, is the oldest. Crossing through the livingroom to check on a crying sibling in the other room, she makes her way over the wooden floor pushing pads of carpet, cut out to replace house slippers.

She dropped out of school after seventh grade. She tells a visitor it was because she was ashamed to go to school without proper clothes. The words are a repeat of what her mother had said just

moments before, and while it may be the truth, it may also be a truth to be exploited.

"I don't really see any future for the kids if things continue like this," says 35-year old Narine Baghoyan, the head of this household. "Every time outsiders enter, we have some hope that something will change eventually."

Eventually is coming sooner, thanks to a project underway designed to make this village an hour west of Yerevan a model for restoration of Armenia's struggling provincial settlements.

A coalition of international agencies led by the Children of Armenia Fund (COAF) have united to reclaim Karakert, then aim to repeat the process in other villages throughout the country.

On a good day, there is wood for heating and cooking in Karakert, but cow dung and straw is the more common fuel supply. There are no telephones; no water delivery system.

In Soviet times Karakert was home to a cheese factory, a food processing plant, a building materials production plant. It also produced 5000 tons of grapes a year bought by wine and cognac factories. Now it produces less than 10 percent of that amount, partly because irrigation systems corroded and collapsed.

The demise of socialism signaled the unpredicted demise of villages like Karakert.

Artavazd Karapetyan, 27, spent his formative years watching Karakert shrink through emigration. In February he became deputy village head, and hopes now to lead its rebuilding.

"This is my land, my water," says Karapetyan. "My ancestors are buried here. I cannot be unhappy to live here."



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Paved roads are part of the plan for the "model" village.

The future Karapetyan sees is only two years away and includes a village where gas and water and new schools and a reconstructed medical clinic and better roads make Karakert a place worth staying.

If for the village leader it is a vision, for the leader of COAF, it is already becoming reality.

New York businessman, COAF founder Garo Armen saw the conditions of Karakert and took its restoration as a challenge.

The Fund devised a comprehensive plan incorporating Karakert's variety of needs into one package of remedies, ranging from basics such as delivery of clothes to the major tasks of building schools and installing irrigation systems.

"No one is really sitting down and connecting the dots," Armen said in a recent visit to COAF's Yerevan offices, adding that by integrating programs, assistance is unified and recovery comes sooner and is more complete.

For example, what is the point of building new schools if children don't have proper clothes for attending? And what is the value of a reformed education program, if students aren't properly nourished for effective studying?

To realize his goal, Armen said he sat out to "construct a Karakert puzzle and identify all outside agencies that can take part in a piece."

COAF's "model village" program gained the attention and support of international aid agencies that include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Through partnerships and fundraising, some \$2 million are expected to be allocated through next year.

Already in its first phase, one school has been renovated and a new school is being built that will be ready for the next school year. A medical clinic has been set up with personnel trained in contemporary issues such as nutrition and pre-natal care, water pipes have been laid to bring (non-potable) water to the village. An apricot orchard has been planted, sponsored by an American-Armenian on land donated by a villager.

"Some of these ideas came through the villagers," Armen says. "When we go to the village, we listen. I may try to guide them a little, but they tell us what they need."

The first thing Karakert needed was garbage pickup, something it hadn't had since the late '80s until COAF bought two garbage trucks and hired locals to do the cleaning.

"For many years people did not have a means of getting rid of garbage," says 41-year old villager Petros Manukyan. "It created huge problems that tremendously hindered people's lives. The difference now is that when they clean the garbage themselves, they are very careful not to throw down rubbish where they stand."



KAREN MIRZDYAN/ARMENIANOW.COM

The village Spiritual Center carries on while hopeful of better conditions in Karakert

survival instinct. The single mother says she "can only trust God."

But, now, she also trusts the routine food ration program set up by COAF and has participated in its clothes distribution, and could take her children to its new health clinic, and could use its garbage service . . .

Petros Manukyan, who is raising three children in Karakert, has traveled in parts of Europe as a member of a sports delegation.

"I always envied those countries when I saw how much attention those kids received," Manukyan says. "Now I can see that our kids will get the same kind of care. They can project their lives and know that they can stay and have a normal life in this village."

Cleaning up Karakert was a step on a path that has a long way to go before people like those six kids in two rooms will enjoy the result. Already, though, some residents of Karakert are seeing change.

"The beginning is very hopeful," says Anna Ghubaryan, 45, who runs Karakert's Spiritual Center. "Real work is being done. Schools are being built, which is a guarantee that improvements will continue. The more bright a childhood is, the higher the child will go in life."

Armen says that his plan was first met with skepticism, but has now changed to an "action-oriented optimism. The attitude no longer is 'What is our fate going to be?'"

For families like Narine Baghoyan's (and there are others worse off in Karakert), the habit of asking strangers for a handout is a