

ACTION PLAN Progress Report – 2008 Fellow, Ovsanna Yeghoyan (Armenia)

“Plastic Bag Free Communities – Environmental Protection and Business Development Opportunities in Rural Areas”

On 19th January 2010, Joan Borley* and Julie Utting* spent an enjoyable and inspiring couple of hours at the Yerevan office of the **Children of Armenia Fund*** (COAF) www.coafkids.org They were welcomed to the office by **Ovsanna Yeghoyan** (2008 Fellow and former Head of Programmes at COAF), Serob Khachatryan (current Head of Programmes), Elsik Azizian (Economic Development Projects Coordinator) and Inessa Grigoryan (Public Relations and Communications).



The purpose of the meeting was for the COAF team to introduce the JSMT representatives to the valuable work that COAF does and to talk specifically about **Ovsanna’s JSMT Action Plan Project** titled “*Plastic Bag Free Communities – Environmental Protection and Business Development Opportunities in Rural Areas*”. The project, developed by Ovsanna during her John Smith Fellowship, is now being implemented within the framework of COAF’s Comprehensive Rural Development Programme in the Armavir District of Armenia, and HSBC Bank Armenia’s Corporate Sustainability Policy.

Ovsanna Yeghoyan (2008 Fellow) and Julie Utting (JSMT) with the new reusable ‘Bag for Life’.

Recognizing the potential and value of the project, HSBC Bank Armenia have partnered with Ovsanna and COAF – publically announced in Yerevan in December 2009. Present at the meeting was HSBC Armenia representative Rouzan Tchetchenyana (PR and Sustainability Specialist) who spoke highly of the new partnership between COAF and HSBC Armenia, and praised the COAF team for their vision and enthusiastic attitude towards the project.

The “*Plastic Bag Free Communities*” project simultaneously tackles a number of key issues facing rural Armenia. It aims to:

- promote a cleaner and safer environment via the reduction in usage and waste of plastic bags
- promote entrepreneurship among rural women who, via sewing cooperatives, produce reusable ‘Bags for Life’ as an alternative to plastic bags
- this leads to the encouragement of economic development and micro-business in rural areas
- at the same time as raising public awareness of the environmental damage caused, and
- empowers women and their families through training and workshops



Elsik Azizian talks about the benefits of the Plastic Bag Free Communities project

The COAF project staff, led by Ovsanna and Elsik, are currently raising awareness of the project in Yerevan and the cluster of target villages of the Armavir District. Recruitment is underway for the sewing cooperatives – of which there has been high interest – and Ovsanna and Elsik have successfully secured an order for the Bag for Life from a local supermarket. The team continues to promote their sustainable bags to supermarkets and are currently in negotiations with various businesses and agencies in order to secure further partners and clients.



Joan Borley (*pictured left*), who was in Yerevan interviewing candidates for the 2010 Fellowship Programme, visited the Baghramian Region of the Armavir District in order to see first hand the work that COAF are carrying out in the rural areas of the country. Accompanied by Inessa Grigoryan of COAF, Joan witnessed some of COAF's completed projects and their work-in-progress, including the village of Karakert where COAF have renovated the health clinic, the local school, two kindergartens, the community center and the public park. Joan observed classes in the newly refurbished school in the village of Lernagog, and in the neighbouring village of Dalarik observed a student workshop organized by COAF dedicated to the topic of disability rights and integration.

Commenting on the visit, Joan stated:

'One doesn't need to be in Armenia long to see the dreadful visual impact of discarded plastic bags caught in trees, shrubs and water courses.

The Baghramian District is amongst the poorest in Armenia - the result of a failed Soviet labour and resettlement scheme - and lies in a treeless, rocky desert pushed up against the border with Turkey. Like everywhere else, it suffers from discarded plastic bags - the only colours in a bleak landscape.

This is where COAF, a most impressive charity organised and largely funded by Armenians in the USA, is actively engaged in the rebuilding of schools, health clinics, and community centres, all supported by up to date training for the local professionals. The key to their success is the engagement and commitment of the community in everything they do, thus ensuring long term sustainability. For instance, the school children have conscientiously taken up the schools' 'anti-smoking, healthy lifestyle initiative' with their families, and engaged in discussions about the inequality of those with disabilities.

I know that the Bag for Life initiative has already created a similar positive response from women in the villages. I'm sure they will become the greatest promoters of the benefits to stem from caring for the environment, employment, and degrees of independence. Over time I hope that the communities will work together to clean up the existing environmental horrors created by throw away plastics.

It was a real privilege to visit the COAF projects, and I think all John Smith Fellows can learn a lot about the importance of grass-roots involvement and successful partnering and outcomes. I look forward to seeing the Bags for Life in the UK too!

If you would like to learn more about COAF's work and Ovsanna's project please use the details below:

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* Joan Borley, until recently, worked for the UK Ministry of Justice, the underpinning sponsor of the John Smith Fellowship Programme. She was responsible for a number of international projects and programmes, relating to democracy, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary. She has now retired from the MOJ and works independently but remains involved in the work of the Trust on a voluntary basis.

* Julie Utting is Communications Officer of the John Smith Memorial Trust

* The Children of Armenia Fund is a non-profit organization working to reduce poverty through the revitalization of rural Armenia