Armenia’s ‘Child-to-Child’ Groups Celebrate Advocacy Success

In Armenia, children from diverse backgrounds are coming together with the support of Save the Children to tackle shared concerns

Armenian children – refugees from Iraq and Azerbaijan and locals -come together to deal with issues…

Save the Children has been working to support Iraqi refugees in Armenia since 2008 with the support of US Department of State funding through the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. The ‘Acculturation through Learning Program’ extends from the capital city of Yerevan to (Darbnik village in) Ararat province south from the capital. In Darbnik, 95% of the population are refugees, who come from Azerbaijan and Iraq and mostly have Armenian origin. Refugees from Azerbaijan have been settled in the village since early 90s. Refugees from (25 families) Iraq have been relocated and provided with UNHCR-renovated apartments in Darbnik in 2009.

One of the components of the program aims to support the integration of refugee school children of different ages into local community and culture through the development of a supportive and inclusive environment. In order to do so, Save the Children used a methodology known as the ‘Child to Child’ (CtC) approach which enables children to play an active and responsible role in integration and development of themselves and communities through involving them in activities that interest, challenge and empower them.

Within the program, Save the Children established seven CtC groups of approximately 20 school children each, and encouraged the child participants to design and deliver small activities. The activities were developed in response to community/in-school issues that the children had themselves identified.

Darbnik Village Success Story

In Darbnik village in Ararat, three CtC groups were set-up, comprising refugee children from Iraq and Azerbaijan, as well as local children.

Of these groups, one decided to focus their efforts on the environment and associated issues of solid waste management. The children gathered items that would ordinarily be thrown away, including plastic bottles and cans; then they displayed them in an exhibition advocating for a ‘Safe and Clean Environment’ both in the village and the school. As a direct result of the campaign, trash-cans were purchased and installed in the school.

Another group wanted to develop an environmental project. With the help of Save the Children, they were put in touch with the ‘Armenia Tree Project’ (ATP) and all of the children were taken to the nursery where they learnt how to plant trees. They went on to plant trees donated by ATP around their school.

A third group elected to develop a project on issues of gender-based violence. They visited the UN office in Yerevan and had a meeting with representatives of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) who talked about their work in combating gender-based violence in the country. The group had the opportunity to discuss issues of gender and violence and got acquainted with the work of the UN in this area. Discussions emphasized the important role of children in promoting human rights, gender equity and the promotion of tolerance in society.

Shared sense of purpose

The CtC groups in Darbnik were supported by two adult facilitators that had been recruited and trained by Save the Children: Anie Manuk a refugee from Iraq, and Astghik Baghdasaryan a member of the local Armenian community who worked in a local school. Both Anie and Astghik earnt the respect and trust of the children, and continued to stay in touch with many of the children beyond the completion of CtC activities.

When the School Director recently decided to cut Astghik’s position due to “financial constraints” it caused quite a stir within the community. Anie attempted to talk to the school to have her colleague reinstated, however her efforts proved fruitless. As the news spread, some children that had participated in the CtC groups got together in support of Astghik.

15-year of Victoria Avetisyan said: “During our last CtC meeting, Astghik informed us that she will soon have to leave the job…I was shocked. I trusted Astghik with all my emotions and ideas and didn’t want her leave the school. She talked to us about all the different topics like equal to equal, and explained things, which our parents would not talk to us about… When I told my uncle about this unfair decision, he said that I should protest and I immediately gathered all my CtC friends. In the beginning, we wanted to go to the school principal, but Astghik advised us to calm down. Later, we decided to write a letter”.

*"After the last meeting with Astghik, I went home in tears. I felt so frustrated and unhappy...”*

-14 year old Anna

The children eventually decided to write a letter to the Principal requesting that Astghik be reinstated. They described her professionalism, leadership, understanding and support of children. The children also stated that they would seek the support of their recently acquired contacts within Save the Children, the UN, local and national authorities. Within two days, Astghik was re-hired.

*"We are happy to be able to help our teacher. Now we know that we have the power to solve the problems we face as children.”*

*-15 year old Nairi*