



Eurasia Feature

ARMENIA: Forming Alliances for Better Living, One Building at a Time



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Forming Alliances for Better Living, One Building at a Time

A recent Eurasia Foundation grantee, Third Nature non-governmental organization has helped bring unprecedented improvements to the quality of life in the newly-built and restored residential buildings of the Shirak region of Armenia. Third Nature has become an important player in Shirak's civil society development, optimizing minimal resources with an energetic vision to organize at the grass roots.

Prior to Third Nature's public service activities, few Shirak residents understood their rights and obligations as apartment dwellers. There was also a serious lack of awareness regarding the real estate privatization process that the government undertook following Armenia's independence in 1991. Third Nature began addressing these issues by helping to organize condominiums, educating the public, promoting grass-roots collaboration and securing government assistance.

"Condominiums are crucial for the maintenance and management of multi-apartment buildings," says Rafael Mkhitarian, Third Nature's project manager. "In Armenia especially, where such buildings were once directly administered by local authorities, it is essential for apartment residents to have control over how their buildings are run. This entails an awareness of rights and responsibilities, good decision making and management at the association level and a symbiotic relationship with local government."



'Our goal is to empower citizens to have an active part in larger democracy-building efforts in Shirak and elsewhere.'

Rafael Mkhitarian, project manager of Third Nature

On the strength of its track record, Third Nature was awarded a Eurasia Foundation grant in 2004. The grant enabled the organization to establish the Shirak Region Condominium Support Center, which has fast become a focal point for supporting condominium proliferation in the city of Gyumri and throughout Shirak. Within the framework of the Eurasia

Foundation grant, Third Nature also helped establish the Shirak Condominium Union (SCU), which brings together condominiums throughout Shirak and shares operational resources with Third Nature.

Funding from the Eurasia Foundation has enabled Third Nature to help establish or improve 17 multi-apartment condominiums, representing 610 buildings and over 17,000 apartments.

Restoring Homes

The devastating earthquake of 1988 destroyed thousands of buildings in the northern region of Shirak and particularly the city of Gyumri, leaving much of the population homeless. As international aid arrived in the wake of the disaster, Gyumri began picking up the pieces, but throughout the next decade reconstruction progressed at a snail's pace. The situation changed only in the late 1990s, when the Lincy Foundation erected 92 residential buildings and the American Red Cross built 22. In addition, the Lincy Foundation helped restore over 2,700 apartments in Gyumri. Assistance was also provided by the Urban Institute, whose Earthquake Zone Recovery Program housed several thousand people.

Despite such improvements, however, building management remained a major issue in the city. As Mkhitarian recalls, "The two culprits were the lack of experience in multi-apartment condominium management, and the fear of apartment residents that self-organization at the condominium level would give the government an excuse to cut off aid programs." Thus, by 2003 a scant 51 residential buildings, comprising some 1,600 apartments, had organized into 13 condominiums.

Strengthening communities



Third Nature started to turn things around when it was founded in 2000 as a Gyumri-based think tank dedicated to researching critical housing and environmental issues. That year, the organization built a databank of vital facts and figures, and already in 2001 began to engage in community activism, entirely on a volunteer basis. Through community meetings, Third Nature urged residents of outlying Gyumri neighborhoods to form condominiums. Furthermore, it launched a public awareness campaign to help repeal a new tax that was added to apartment association fees in response to rising property values.

The organization's efforts paid off in 2002 when the Armenian Parliament passed a law rescinding the additional condominium tax. Third Nature continued to educate the public through its collaboration with the Urban Institute, and assisted the Mush-2 Community Center (another Eurasia Foundation grantee) to implement a condominium-promotion effort in Gyumri's Mush-2 neighborhood, where only 20 percent of apartments had been privatized.

In 2003, Third Nature's work reached a new level of sophistication and effectiveness. That year, the organization held a major meeting with representatives of Gyumri condominiums to explore more systematic modes of collaboration. Third Nature also expanded public awareness efforts and began providing technical assistance and consultation to existing and newly-formed condominiums. With assistance from the Eurasia Foundation in 2004, Third Nature compiled and published a manual for condominium formation encompassing all the logistical, social, economic and legal aspects of managing multi-apartment buildings. The booklet was distributed throughout Armenia.

The Eurasia Foundation grant has also supported a number of other activities provided by Third Nature and its Shirak Region Condominium Support Center. With a small, dedicated staff and a growing databank, the center offers consultation and core training to

existing condominiums and groups planning to form condominiums.

Technical assistance provided by the center includes providing guidance on the day-to-day management of multi-apartment buildings, collaborating with local government departments like fire and utilities, forming budgets and internal regulations, holding condominium meetings and keeping records, and writing official letters. Eager to improve their consultation skills and scope of work, Third Nature staff members participate in various seminars and conferences on housing, condominium, and environmental issues.

Educating the public on condominium issues remains another Third Nature strong point. Also within the framework of the Eurasia Foundation grant, the grantee publishes a quarterly newsletter of advocacy activities, has launched the SCU Web site, and distributes public awareness flyers on a regular basis. In addition, Third Nature has aired public service announcements on local television, while organization members continue to appear on radio and TV programs and publish proactive opinion pieces in local and national newspapers.

"Our goal is to empower citizens to have an active part in larger democracy-building efforts in Shirak and elsewhere," Mkhitarian says. "The formation and maintenance of good condominiums has a bearing on all aspects of social and economic life, and the effectiveness of our services is significantly broadened



today with to the assistance of the Eurasia Foundation."

Coordinating efforts

Third Nature's fundamental advocacy of collaboration with other civil society organizations and local government bodies has led to considerable gains for Gyumri residents. In 2004 Armenia's Ministry of Urban

Development established a collaborative relationship with Third Nature, inviting it to join forces for better urban planning.

Third Nature remains a strong advocate of privatization in Shirak and beyond. The organization has successfully lobbied the Armenian Parliament for granting the Shirak and Lori regions privileged status in terms of privatization timeframes. As a result, the government extended these regions' privatization deadline of March 31, 2004, by two years.

"Given the amount of community-wide enthusiasm for strengthening condominiums, I think the Shirak region may well become a model for optimal multi-apartment management throughout Armenia," Mkhitaryan says.