

Armenia MLSA/ UNDP National Accelerator Project

This summer was an incredible experience, growth and learning opportunity. Not only did I learn a lot about UN development programs and projects but I also learned and got to experience a lot when it comes to Armenian culture. As an Armenian American, the time I spent there was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity to connect with my heritage.

While rereading my reflections, I began to feel proud of myself because I went through a lot this summer and definitely had some growth moments. I am not a person who typically does well with changes and it often gives me stress. This summer, I definitely found myself having to be flexible and more independent within a group. Little things made me feel very independent and proud of myself - like riding the subway and getting off at the correct stop, or when I ordered food in Armenian.

I found myself having to be aware of cultural differences and adapt to a language barrier. Whether it was Tata and Anna translating for me or my partners giving me sensitivity training (where I had to be aware of groups that had tensions within the training), my community partners always helped me adapt. I feel I was extremely lucky when it came to my community partners. Right off the bat they welcomed me and my ideas. I always felt comfortable asking them for help and for more information on why we were doing something a particular way. We had an extremely easy going relationship where we could talk about anything; I was able to open up to them and they were able to open up to me. I feel that maybe many others weren't given the level of independence yet support that I was, which really helped me grow into a leader on this particular project.

While in Armenia, I worked on three different sub-projects for the UNDP & Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs's National Accelerator:

The main project I contributed to as a leader was women's economic empowerment within remote regions of Armenia. Our goal for the project was to train roughly 250 women to be able to work a job completely digitally and remote. This is so that they can receive higher wages than they normally would in a remote region of Armenia. I did extensive research on different freelancing websites, collecting data on how much an Armenian typically makes on the various platforms, their education levels, and the most successful jobs to freelance for. We determined that the best job to train them would be in digital marketing because it would teach them many skills that they could then use to acquire freelancing jobs. I also researched what types of training programs would be best and determined a set of different programs and rated them on their success and sustainability. We then used those training programs as a way to inform our own program's design. I wrapped up at the stage where we were hiring an outside firm to run the program and I was to give them a comprehensive outline of everything I had done (designing the program). They are now able to implement that program because of my work and the program and training will continue to happen through December. After December, the Impact AIM team will be able to analyze if it was a success. If the project is successful, there are ways to make it self-sustaining, but that is something that we will continue to look at after the program has wrapped up in its entirety.

The second program I helped on was during ImpactAIM's Impact Measurement and Management trainings. The goal of the trainings were to train female led startups in the Eastern European/ West Asian region to align their startups' goals with the UN sustainable development goals. They were also trained in how to pitch their startups and how to measure their startups' impact on their community of interest! I helped create surveys so that we could gauge what the participants learned from each of the sessions and helped with reports on the project's successes. While my particular cohort's data has not yet been made publicly available, they have asked ImpactAIM to do another round of trainings, so I view that as a success. I loved working on this project because I got to observe a specific community of people: female startup owners. As a business minor, I not only learned a lot for my own learning and growth during the trainings but I really enjoyed being in a community of vastly different women who were all alike in at least one way and shared a similar mindset when it comes to business.

The last project I worked on was for the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and I was researching different models and policies for childcare for children aged 1-3 years in countries similar to Armenia. This work was for the Women's Resource Center of Armenia and the work I did was provided to a consultant and they will compile it to inform a policy recommendation for the Armenian government.

While in Armenia, I also got the opportunity to visit one of the farmers I had worked with last year during my research on soil health. Virap is now in his second year of growing cover crops and has actually increased the land that he covers with cover crops. He uses his plots to show other farmers, and there are now a total of 4 different demonstration plots throughout different regions in Armenia. It made me incredibly happy and proud to see this and I was truly moved by his commitment (and early adoption) of sustainable farming practices, like cover crops. I've included pictures from this experience at the bottom of the post.

I have realized that development is not done overnight and that true long lasting change takes time and the involvement of local communities. All of the work I did in Armenia continues on after I have left and I view that as a good thing, because it makes the projects sustainable. I will miss many things about Armenia and the people I've worked alongside the entire summer. I hope to visit them all soon. I've stayed connected via social media and I am still a part of the whatsapp group. I've asked for updates on the "Accelerator#5. National Platform for Economic Empowerment of Women" as I was one that project from its inception, and I am hopeful it will be a success.

I am not sure what the next chapter of my Laidlaw journey will be but I will continue to take all that I have learned this year and this summer with me. I would love to mentor the next cohort of Laidlaw scholars and I have already set up meetings with underclassmen to share the Laidlaw Scholars Program with them and share what I've learned as a Laidlaw Scholar.



Picture 1: Artak showing Virap's cover crop demonstration plots in Pokr Vedi, Ararat Valley.



Picture 2: The field directly in front has not had any additional water (no water besides rain water) and the perennial cover crops have grown back in year 2.



Picture 3: Cows graze in the fields to provide natural fertilizer.



Picture 4: This is the additional plot of Cover Crops Virap planted this year.



Picture 5: Artak translates that Virap uses a solar powered electric fence to keep the cows in specific areas.



Picture 6: Weeds that grow in a nearby plot that do not grow in the cover crop fields because the cover crop out competes it- therefore the cover crops act as a natural weed suppressant.



← Picture 7: This is the top soil in the field without the cover crops

Picture 8: This is the top soil in the field with the → cover crops.

The field without the cover crops risks losing its topsoil to erosion and run off. The cover crop field's soil has aggregated together and the cover crops' roots help retain soil structure.





Picture 9: One of our impact trainings with UNDP ImpactAIM and the Women led Startups



Picture 10: Armenian Workforce Development Activity Meeting



Picture 11: Narek and Anna, part of the ImpactAIM Team I got to work with!