

**The Hidden Road Initiative:
“Using Internet to connect roads and bridge issues”**

Main Objective:

To establish Internet connection in the remote village of Aghbradzor, located in eastern Armenia, as an innovative way in combating poverty, connecting the villagers to the rest of the world, empowering the new generation of students, promoting democratic development, and encouraging civic engagement and government transparency.

Introduction & Background Information:

Imagine living through a cold winter where the snow is so heavy that you are not able to leave your village for six months. There are no roads, no markets, and no doctors. All you have is your family, your home, your school and your faith. This is the situation in which the villagers of Aghbradzor have lived through every winter for generations. Isolated on the mountains of eastern Armenia, the village has no open roads from October to April. Yet the villagers choose to stay on their land despite the circumstances: “We persevere! How can we leave our homeland, our mountain? We have to protect our country’s borders!” says Ginevard, the principal of the only village school in Aghbradzor.

Visiting the village during the summer of 2009 was a wake-up call for me as a first year Armenian UCSB student studying Political Science and working to make a difference in the world. Using my video camera as my only instrument of change, I went to the village and gathered stories and interviewed the villagers. In the meantime, as an intern at the UN Development Program of Armenia, I was encouraged to go beyond filming a documentary and to actually take action in promoting development. Thus, according to the needs of the village, I designed an educational day camp that taught children basic skills in first-aid, English, arts, dance and computer. I hoped that with this camp, the students would be able to gain skills that could help them help themselves in the absence of resources such as doctors, art teachers, and extra curricular activities.

Upon leaving Armenia, I decided it would be very important to fundraise enough money and be able to fix the road that led to the main highway. I continued fundraising on campus and in the community for the nonprofit Act for Armenia, that helps renovate and improve 5 schools in remote villages, including Aghbradzor. However, my dream of helping fix the broken road soon appeared to be an unreasonable solution. After much research, I realized fixing the road would not be a permanent solution to the problem since the heavy snow would destroy and damage the roads every winter.

Project Description:

By establishing Internet connection in the village, I would be able to create a *virtual* road that would be a permanent and innovative solution to a key problem of the village – isolation. Internet would also provide access to new resources of learning through e-education while empowering and motivating the youth.

With the partnership of Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) and Act for Armenia, my project would bring IT workers from Yerevan to install Internet routers in the village that would receive signals from the nearby antennas. Because Armenia is small and underdeveloped country, there is ample bandwidth available to bring Internet access to any remote area like the village of Aghbradzor that has a reliable electrical supply and that does receive cell phone signals. As a summer intern at AGBU, I have worked closely with the organization and have been familiarized with their projects. For this initiative, I have established a partnership with AGBU'S Young Professionals (YP) team - the YPs have already facilitated many similar projects in the rural villages of Armenia. They have agreed to provide me with the expertise and the aid to buy new computers and help install the Internet routers on the village computers.

In addition to installing Internet, I plan on running a program that would engage Computer Science students from Yerevan State University to help set up the computer room in the school and provide trainings and workshops. I have already contacted students from the university and they are looking forward to this opportunity. With the collaboration of Microsoft Innovation Center Armenia, UNDP, and Yerevan State University students, I propose spending a week teaching and training the village students and teachers about the effective and educational use of the Internet. The workshops will include training on key topics such as: Communication (Skype and/or social networking sites), political engagement (news sources and government sites), education (educational resources online for teachers and students, google-search, etc), and employment (online jobs, local employment opportunities in Armenia).

To promote this proposal, I have prepared a short documentary using the footage I filmed in the village during my last visit. I have many stories and personal accounts about the hidden road's adverse effect on the villagers' mobilization and future. The purpose of the video is to raise awareness among the American community and help promote the program I am trying to implement. So far, I have raised \$2,000 using the documentary.

I also plan on engaging the UNDP office in this project, as they are interested to spread their e-governance program in Armenia that aims to reduce political corruption.

Why is this important?

Short-term goals:

The Internet will be a great resource for facilitating communication and providing education to combat a variety of social issues.

Long-term goals:

The Internet connection in the village will create a new "informed society" and would provide access to public information and services. Internet will also help in fighting the widespread corruption in the country while increasing transparency: "This helps reduce instances of corruption by eliminating opportunities for government employees in the regions to misuse their authority in providing public information."¹

Finally, this project can have a "multiplier effect" by engaging other students and local participants in public service. First, the project can engage researchers from Armenian universities who would potentially examine the effects of Internet usage on a given population. Second, the project could encourage students to implement similar projects in other villages in Armenia. Finally, university students would be empowered to establish their own local organizations promoting innovative and educational ideas to the rest of Armenia.

¹ <http://europeandcis.undp.org/home/show/67EF3AC3-F203-1EE9-B50E475CE8E3D472>

Potential Obstacles

1. Inability to get access to Internet: The AGBU team has contacted Gor Mikaelyan, an IT worker in a local Internet providing company. He has assured us based on his expertise that since the village already receives cell-phone reception, it will surely be able to have access to the Internet.
2. Lack of Funding: In case the funds from Strauss foundation are not enough to implement the entire project, the nonprofit Act for Armenia can find additional funders and donors for the project. I have spoken with the AGBU team in Armenia and they believe \$8,000 will be sufficient.

Timeline:

November:

- Contacted the village school's principal and asked about needs and interests in this project. Contacted founder of Act for Armenia to inquire about feasibility and logistics of project

December- January:

- Contacted AGBU to develop and inquire about partnership in project

January:

- Contacted UCSB Political Science Professor Bruce Bimber
- Confirmed AGBU partnership in Armenia with Anna Aghajanian
- Contacted Yerevan State University Computer Science department and found student volunteers (Leader: Artashes Avagyan)

February 2:

- Grant proposal due

Spring:

- Finalize partnerships with Yerevan State University and AGBU
- Contact UNDP for a potential partnership
- Contact VivaCell and other Internet providing companies
- Contact the village school principal about finalization of project
- Buy computers through the help of Anna Aghajanian (AGBU)
- Meet regularly (via Skype and Internet) with AGBU team at Yerevan
- Organize training camp with Artashes Avagyan and his team of Computer Science students

July—August

- Implement the project and conduct the workshops

Fall 2011-Winter 2012

- Follow up on the use of Internet access through AGBU team and Yerevan State student team
- Evaluate and research its usage and its effects on development

Winter 2012- Spring 2012

- Conduct regular Skype meetings with the students in the village
- Send survey questions to the students and teachers and ask them about the advantages and disadvantages of their Internet usage
- Write a research paper on the use of Internet in rural villages in promoting development

Budget:

\$2,000 – My travel expenses to Armenia (Roundtrip SFO to EVN)

\$200 – Travel expenses to the village along with students

\$200 – Resources for presentations and workshops

\$1,800 – Buy 4 new computers

\$ 200 – Buy 4 web cameras

\$300 – Buy 3G routers

\$200 – Buy WiFi Receivers, LAN cables, other auxiliary items

\$200—Installation fee

\$60 – Monthly fee*

\$ 1,000 – Renovate, paint computer room

\$3,840 – Provide funds for maintenance and monthly fee

TOTAL: \$10,000**

* The students in Armenia are working with network providers to eliminate or reduce the monthly fee. We hope to get funding and sponsorship from major Armenian network company and eliminate the monthly fee.

**Prices are approximate. They are based on information I received from the AGBU Armenia team who has done several of these projects around Armenia.

Advisors:

- Anahid Yeremian – Founder of Act for Armenia, Particle Accelerator Physicist at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, Stanford, CA
- Anna Aghajanian – Project Manager, Armenian General Benevolent Union, Yerevan, Armenia
- Bruce Bimber – Professor of Political Science and Communications, UCSB, Santa Barbara, CA

Prospective Partners:

- UNDP: <http://www.undp.am/>
- Microsoft: <http://www.micarmenia.am/en/trainings>

Sources:

Darbinian, Artashes. "How to Build Open Information Societies." *UNDP Informations and Communication Technologies Development*. Web. 1 Nov. 2010.

<<http://europeandcis.undp.org/home/show/67EF3AC3-F203-1EE9-B50E475CE8E3D472>>.

Kiernan, Stephen P. *Authentic Patriotism: Restoring America's Founding Ideals through Selfless Action*. New York: St. Martin's, 2010. Print.

Mkrtumyan, Igor. "Concept of Internet Development in Armenia." *Internet Society of Armenia*. American University of Armenia. Web. 1 Nov. 2010.

<http://www.isoc.am/publ/concept.pdf>