



■ WARM EMBRACE
Narine Sahakyan, 8,
shares a secret with her
father, Stepan.

OFF TO A GOOD START

World Vision Canada recently started child sponsorship in Armenia. The new program gives families the resources they need to build a better future *By Naira Adamyan*
Photography by Vartan Zadoyan

THE SAD EXPRESSION in Narine Sahakyan's eyes seems to reflect her surroundings. The eight-year-old Armenian girl lives with her family of six in an old cargo container because they can't afford a house. The wallpaper is dirty and torn. A broken TV set serves as a desk. An unpleasant smell hangs in the room because the family uses dry cow dung to fuel their small stove.

Narine's mother, Lena, earns a little money milking neighbours' cows. Her father, Stepan, tends the villagers' sheep. Usually he's paid in cash or food; sometimes he's not paid at all.

Half of the population of Armenia lives below the poverty line. The mountainous nation suffered terribly after the collapse of Communism in 1990. The decade that followed brought high unemployment rates. Incoming governments spent their resources in a territorial dispute with neighbouring Azerbaijan and failed to invest in health care, education, and infrastructure. For most Armenians, life is a struggle.

Last August, World Vision established a Canadian-funded child sponsorship program in the former Soviet republic. Children living within the geographical boundaries of the program, such as Narine, are eligible for child sponsorship. Using funds from child sponsors, World

Vision partners with these impoverished communities to bring lasting change and hope for the future.

"The process of choosing a location for a new program starts with a detailed analysis of statistical data, such as economic status, rates of unemployment, poverty, and child malnutrition," says Shaghik Maroukhyan, operations manager for World Vision Armenia. "Visits to communities and meetings with local leaders help us better understand the situation and decide on the location."

The new child sponsorship program has been established in the district of Talin, about 60 kilometres northwest of the capital, Yerevan. This region of 36,000 people encompasses the town of Talin and 40 other villages, including the one in which Narine and her family live. Winter temperatures here can drop to -25°C . The summer sun can scorch the vegetation on the mountains.

Despite the harsh climate, families in Talin cultivate wheat and barley and breed cattle and sheep. Farming became more difficult in recent years when decades-old irrigation systems fell into disrepair, making families completely dependent on regular rainfall. Narine's family cultivates a bit of land, but last year's harvest wasn't good. "We planted wheat, but had only eight sacks of flour from the yield," says Lena.

Lack of clean drinking water is also a problem in the villages. Narine's 14-year-old brother, Karen, is responsible for fetching buckets of water from a public tap and pushing it home in a wheelbarrow. In winter, the pipes often freeze, forcing villagers to light bonfires under the pipes to thaw them.

Getting nutritious food presents another challenge. Narine

is thin and short for her age. She eats an almost unvarying diet of cooked wheat or pasta. In the summer, her mother buys vegetables and, sometimes, apples. Meat is a luxury reserved for New Year's Day. Many children in the region suffer from



POVERTY

Below, left: Karen pulls on his father's boots. He does not have a pair of his own. Below, right: World Vision staff member Gayane Khachatryan (right) visits a poor family in Artik village.





malnutrition. "In some villages, children have fainted at school because of hunger," says Karen Harutyunyan, manager of the Talin program.

With a lack of clean drinking water and nutritious food, it's not surprising that children are often sick. Health posts in the region are in poor condition and lack qualified doctors and nurses. Some hospitals have no heat. Narine had a brother who contracted measles, a treatable childhood illness. He died at the age of one. The family has no extra money for doctors or medicine. "If I give our money to a doctor, how are we going to feed four children?" asks Lena.

Schools are another expense beyond the reach of many communities. Preschools in most of the villages are closed because of a shortage of funds. Many elementary schools lack teachers, textbooks, school supplies, or heat. To get an education, most children must walk several kilometres to neighbouring villages.

With so many problems in Talin District, it wasn't difficult for World Vision to decide to start up a child sponsorship program. The first step was to build trust with communities. "We met with community leaders, school principals, and all those who are well aware of the problems," says Harutyunyan. "Many charities that worked in the area in the past implemented short-term projects without involving the communities. People expected similar actions from us." When it was made clear that World Vision intended to partner with the communities for 10 to 15 years, residents expressed their enthusiastic support.

After hiring local staff, World Vision visited all the villages in the region to assess their needs. "Based on several criteria, such as the situation with water, roads, nutrition, and schools, we selected the 15 most needy communities to become part of the Talin child sponsorship program," says Harutyunyan.

World Vision then selected 1,000 children, ages three to 10,



to become eligible for child sponsorship. Talin staff members visited their homes, collecting information about each child and helping the families understand the child sponsorship program.

Work has already begun in Talin, using funds from Canadian child sponsors. Projects include rehabilitating pipelines, irrigation systems, and schools. World Vision has started a free computer class for impoverished children. At Easter, World Vision hosted a celebration at which children received warm clothing and other gifts.

Future projects will include income-generating activities, HIV/AIDS education, and improved health care. "We also plan to organize summer camps, have children's parties, and host other events," Harutyunyan says excitedly.

The residents of Talin have much to look forward to and appear to be welcoming the changes in their communities. The mayor's right-hand man, Mousheg Marabyan, detects a new sense of hopefulness in Talin. "People in the villages are ready to take part in any initiatives that will improve their situation."

■ FAMILY BOND

Top, left: The Sahakyan children sit on a rusty bed in their backyard, where they usually play. Top, right: Karen (left) and Narine live in a cargo container.

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