

American People Help “Fetch Water” in the Akhaltsikhe Region

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On Thursday, April 21, the USAID-funded Georgia Employment and Infrastructure Initiative held an opening ceremony to celebrate the completion of two important community projects in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

Pat Moller, the United States Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission, Denny Robertson, USAID Caucasus Mission Director, Patrick Sommerville, CHF Country Director, Papuna Khachidze, Deputy Regional Governor, and Rowena Cross-Najafi, U.S. Embassy Public Affairs Officer all attended the event.

Ivlita is a small village of 248 people, located 3 kilometers west of Akhaltsikhe in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The primary source of Ivlita's income is agriculture, and due to its low productivity, outflight of the young and working age population has been occurring, with the regional youth fleeing at an increasingly alarming rate. Both water projects were undertaken because of the cooperation between citizens of the Ivlita community and CHF International, and within the framework of Georgia Employment and Infrastructure Initiative (GEII).

Pat Moller, the United States Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission said: “I am really delighted to be here with you today. I am particularly happy to have the Deputy Governor as part of the mission to congratulate you on your outstanding work. Water projects are among the most important facilities that a community can own. It makes me very happy as a representative of the United States Embassy in Georgia to see a local community that has been able to do such a remarkable thing for itself. Our colleagues at USAID bring you financial and technical expertise to help you help yourselves but the money that USAID uses for these projects comes from the American People. As a citizen of the United States, it makes me very happy to see what you have done with the financial help the American taxpayers have provided their government for USAID to administer such projects like this one.”

GEII is a five-year, USAID-funded project implemented by CHF since October 2004. It works directly with communities to improve economic services and infrastructure, such as roads, potable water supplies and irrigation systems, gas and electric systems, and public markets.

Coordinating closely with the private sector, local government and other development partners, communities are taking leadership roles, working to prioritize and implement demand-driven economic and social community projects that generate income and create long-term employment for local citizens.

Patrick Sommerville, CHF Country Director, congratulated the Ivlita community on this remarkable day. “This is a great opportunity to share with you the good work that the community of Ivlita has done in partnership with GEII program. The GEII program is currently entering 30 communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which is an extremely important region that we will complete over the next five years. Just this year we intend to implement about 40-50 projects with these 30 selected communities. The irrigation project that has just been completed is one example and we expect that it will assist farmers in increasing their incomes by 50%, which will make a substantial economic impact of this program. Also, there will be other benefits. Time required to collect water for households will be reduced and people will not need to transport water. This savings will allow the population more time for their agricultural activities”.

Denny Robertson, director of USAID Caucasus Mission, told Georgia Today: “The initiative came from the Ivlita community and they received financial assistance from the American tax-payers. It is a measure of friendship between the two nations. Throughout Georgia local communities are really facing difficult times. Through this

program we are trying to help 400 communities solve some of the most crucial problems they face. We know that the greatest need is to find a way to create employment for the young people who want to stay in the communities, and this is a good example of this." Having jobs is a reason for the young people to stay.

"I wish to express my sense of gratitude to the sponsoring and executive organizations – USAID and CHF respectively. I also want to thank each members of the Ivliita community, who have come together, coordinated their ideas, found a key to the solution themselves, with almost no involvement by the governmental side. I long to see the opportunity for more and more similar projects to be implemented in Georgia," Papuna Khachidze, the Deputy Regional Governor, who was officially representing the local government, said in his remarks.

"We began our partnership with USAID when, due to a breakdown of the transformer powering Ivliita's irrigation system, last year's harvest was disastrous. We contacted CHF's regional office in Akhaltsikhe to help us organize a program for community development. We elected a committee of 9 men and they, together with the community, outlined the priorities, which included the renovation of the transformer and the reconstruction of the interior village drinking water supply network. We gained USAID funding. This provision of water has improved the everyday life of each family as well as the sanitary conditions of the whole village," Guram Gikoshvili, Ivliita's community development council coordinator, told the audience.

The daily concern of the villagers before was how and where to fetch water from. It took them several hours to collect water from neighboring villages. The energy and time that has been saved is presently being used to benefit families, including the cultivation of land, raising all kinds of crops - including vegetables, etc.

One of the Ivliita residents, having no chance to speak to the audience, chose a much simpler and more impressive way to show his joy: he ran straight towards the place where the flags of Georgia and of the United States of America were flying and kissed them both out of respect. Without knowing a single word in English, he managed to convey his emotions and received a stream of applause in response.

GEII will continue to select hundreds of communities that will demonstrate initiative and strong motivation to bring about change until 2007 in all regions of Georgia, with the exception South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to participate in the program.