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## Supporting Turkmenistan's efforts to develop local self-governance

*Pilot project grows into nationwide initiative*



*The newly-built secondary school in the village of Belek*

**Ashgabat, 28 May 2013** - After many years of going to a local secondary school in the second shift, the school life of Annayeva Ashirgul, the 9<sup>th</sup> year schoolgirl, has finally returned to normal following the construction of a new multimedia school for 320 children in her home village of Belek in December 2012. This village with more than 1100 inhabitants is located 70 kilometers from the regional center of Balkan province in western Turkmenistan. Along with many other schoolchildren, Ashirgul is now able to attend classes in regular school hours, which was impossible some few years ago because the old school building simply could not accommodate

all children in one shift. Built half a century ago (1966), the old school was in need of major repairs, re-equipment and reconstruction. The aggregate effect was that teachers could not ensure high-quality education for children.

*“Classes in the second shift affected quality of Ashirgul’s learning and organization of her educational process as a whole. As any other child, she wanted to have rest from school in the evening, enjoy the company of friends and family, and morning time was never enough for doing school homework,”* recalls Ashirgul’s mother Annayeva Bayramgul.

Until recently, the issue of improving the socio-economic infrastructure of this settlement, including construction of a new, comfortable school, as well as a number of other vitally important social facilities was one of the most pressing issues on the agenda of the village of Belek. Other than construction of the new school, some remote village households also faced the problem of uninterrupted supply of electricity and water.

The situation began to change starting from 2007, when the Parliament of Turkmenistan (Mejlis) partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in a four year joint project (2007-2010) with the budget worth nearly half a million US dollars. The project aimed to improve quality of public services at the local level through strengthening capacity of local councils in 10 pilot Gengeshliks (territorial units consisting of one or several villages), including the village of Belek. The project also worked at the central level to improve the legal and policy framework for further development of local self-governance in Turkmenistan.



*Residents of the village of Belek participate in local planning training*

Residents of the village of Belek, local community leaders and representatives of the local council took advantage of a series of trainings carried out by UNDP in 2008-2009 in all 10 pilot Gengeshliks and the city of Ashgabat, focusing on the issues relating to functions and administrative management of local councils, budgeting, project management and planning, community mobilization and strengthening of social partnership between local councils and the population. As a result, the villagers managed to draw a business plan for development of their settlement that provided for qualitative assessment of priority needs, identification of available resources and capabilities and proposals for construction of a new school. Thus, one of the urgent problems of the village has been solved.

*“Now the schoolchildren have much more time to prepare for classes, recreation and leisure and teachers can better plan their work throughout the school year. This, in turn, led to significant improvement in education process, allowing teachers to practice interactive methods of learning and strengthen partnership between the teaching staff and the parents' committee,”* said the school director, Gurbanglych Amanglychev, one of the participants of UNDP training program.

*“Our proposal to build a new school was included in the plan of socio-economic development of our village that we called ‘The Future Model of My Village,’ which was later included in the plan of development of the whole region as part of the larger National Programme of the President of Turkmenistan on Improvement of Social and Living Conditions in Villages, Towns and District Centers for the period up to 2020. The President of Turkmenistan adopted this programme in 2011,”* explains Suleiman Begliyev, chairman of the Belek village council.



*New kindergarten in the village of Belek*

To date, under the National Programme on Improvement of Social and Living Conditions in Villages, Towns and District Centers until 2020, the social infrastructure in the village of Belek has been totally renewed. With funds from the state budget, the local authorities built a new kindergarten for 100 children and recreation center for 200 visitors, as well as hospital and shopping center. A railway station has been also reconstructed, and a new telephone exchange for 512 subscribers has been erected. More than 6.5 km of roads have been constructed.

As for the residents of the village of Belek, they made their own contribution to the renewal of local social infrastructure by implementing two mini-projects with UNDP support. Using UNDP grant money, they partnered with local authorities to build an 800-meter water pipeline, electrical towers with new transmission lines and additional transformer to ensure stable supply of clean drinking water and electricity to local households with some 1,174 dwellers. As chairman of the Belek village council Suleiman Begliyev proudly noted, this is a good example of the effective use of local capacities and human resources in developing important strategic documents at the local level.

The UNDP grant program worth more than USD 90,000 was used to fund a total of 14 mini-projects in all pilot Gengeshliks to enable local communities to improve social services and strengthen capacity of local authorities.

As a result of the UNDP grant program:

- **More than 200 new houses** accounting for **more than 2,000 dwellers** in Gengeshlik “Berkarar” in Akhal province **got access to uninterrupted supply of electricity** following the installation of a new power transformer;

- **More than 330 children** of secondary school number 16 of the village of Abadan in Akhal province are now **able to go to various sport classes in the renovated gym** that was also equipped with modern sport equipment;
- **More than 10 kilometers of the main road** were laid in Gengeshlik “Chovdur” in Lebap province, **connecting two villages with more than 9,000 residents**, who now enjoy better transport services and safer environment;
- **More than 1,000 residents** of Gengeshlik “Paraw” in Balkan province **got access to clean drinking water** thanks to the installation of necessary equipment at the water well.

Heads of local administrations, leadership of the Mejlis and other members of the Turkmen Parliament, working in the respective constituencies, were actively involved in the implementation of the UNDP grant program at the local level. They regularly visited the pilot regions to meet with local residents and responded promptly to requests and suggestions on the pace of construction work, as well as timely and quality expenditure of grant money. Many of them were able to enhance their knowledge and capacities on local development planning in the UNDP training programme that eventually covered more than 800 stakeholders, including members of local councils and authorities, community leaders and civil servants.

UNDP also supported the large-scale public awareness campaign demonstrating the progress made in the field of local self-governance through mass media and television at the local and central level. In the course of campaign, members of pilot Gengeshliks exchanged visits to share experiences in advancing local development plans, while MPs, representatives of local authorities were able discuss plans of future joint work in the course of two national conferences in 2008 and 2009. In



*Construction of new road in Gengeshlik “Chovdur” in Lebap province*

addition, more than 1,500 stakeholders were equipped with relevant reference literature on self-governance in Turkmenistan.

The UNDP training program on the principles of self-governance, which was successfully piloted in the course of the project, has been scaled up and included in the curriculum of the Academy of Civil Service of Turkmenistan. In addition to basic disciplines students of the Academy are now required to attend lectures on such topics as “Functions of Gengeshi”, “Administration management of Gengeshi”, “Participatory local development planning at Gengeshi level”, “Local project development and administration”, “Local self-governance development in Turkmenistan”, “Social mobilization at district level”.

*“The new form of interaction with local communities in the pilot Gengeshliks through the practices offered by UNDP as part of the joint project is now widely and successfully used in the system of state administration and management at the national level,”* said Ahmed Chariyev, Chairman of the Mejlis’s Committee on relations with local authorities and local councils.

Indeed, the Mejlis is now using the newly gained experience in a large-scale initiative put forward by the President of Turkmenistan in 2012 to reform the system of local self-governance in the country. The Mejlis of Turkmenistan in coordination with local authorities has identified 5 pilot districts in each province for this exercise. The ultimate goal of this nationwide initiative is to develop a model of administrative-territorial management to improve socio-economic development and strategic planning at the level of villages, Gengeshliks and districts. These efforts complement the National Programme on Improvement of Social and Living Conditions in Villages, Towns and District Centers until 2020.