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# Interview with Consuelo Vidal, UNDP Resident Coordinator

A Conversation with Consuelo Vidal  
Interview by Sona Hamalian

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UNITED WITH THE HEARTBEAT OF ARMENIA

Consuelo Vidal is the United Nations' Resident Coordinator as well as the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Armenia. On the job since 2005, she is in charge of administering the UN Development Assistance Framework for the years 2005 through 2009, comprising a host of projects that foster economic growth, sustainable community development, environmental protection, and democracy-building across the Armenian republic. Vidal works closely with the Government of Armenia, particularly in the contexts of the UN Millennium Development Goals and the Armenian Poverty Reduction Strategy. Her initiatives have also garnered the unflinching support of Armenian civil society, from the business sector to the far-flung communities of the country's regions. Today Vidal's mission is marked by the twin advantages of the outsider's objective eye and the local field worker's compassion and sensitivity. To say that she loves her work is tantamount to stating that she believes in the untapped potential and future of the Armenian people.

SONA HAMALIAN: What would you say is the most underrated aspect of Armenia?

CONSUELO VIDIAL: I think Armenians themselves are not fully aware of their own human resources. In terms of development work, we see that there is an extraordinary level of human capital in Armenia, a wonderful social fabric poised for progress, something that Armenian society as a whole has yet to fully acknowledge and tap into, for Armenia's development.

Contrast this with the outstanding professional and entrepreneurial successes of Armenians abroad. Why is it that a similar rate of success eludes Armenians in the homeland? I believe it is due in part to the legacy of the Soviet system, which did not welcome initiatives, entrepreneurship, did not allow creativity to flow freely. This is how I explain some of the difference between Armenian citizens and their compatriots in the Diaspora. People here still wait for instructions and solutions to problems to come from above. Transforming this mindset will take some time.

SH: The UN operations in Armenia are based on the UN Development Assistance Framework for the years 2005 through 2009. What are the main goals of the Framework?

CV: The UN in Armenia supports the achievement of social, economic, democratic and environmental governance, our two overarching goals are: 1) to address social and economic inequality, and 2) to encourage citizen engagement and participation in democratic processes. Against all odds, Armenia's economic performance has been phenomenally positive in recent years. Yet it's also true that growth has been limited mostly to Yerevan. Outside the capital, throughout the regions but especially in rural communities, socio-economic disparities and poverty are still major challenges. It is crucial that people living in

the regions become included in the economy generated by Yerevan. On the other hand, I believe we should make it easier and more productive for citizens to create and pursue economic opportunities at the local level. To this end, citizens must become far more rigorously engaged in the civic life, economic and democratic institutions of their communities. Civic engagement and economic growth must and do go hand in hand.

SH: The Government of Armenia adopted a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper in 2003, in accordance with the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which comprise a wide range of reform and economic-development objectives. Do you believe that eradicating mass poverty and improving living standards within the next decade are realistic prospects?

CV: I think they are. Overall poverty in Armenia has been reduced drastically in the last 10 years. This is a remarkable achievement. But the continued development of Armenia hinges considerably on addressing issues of socio-economic disparity in the regions. Provided there's a concerted effort with this regard, in Yerevan but particularly in the regions, I think the eradication of extreme poverty within the next decade is quite feasible. After having worked in seven countries, I am very optimistic about Armenia.

SH: The UNDP works closely with the Government of Armenia to implement its projects. What has been your experience with the government as a partner and facilitator?

CV: In fact, all of the UN agencies operating in Armenia work closely with the Government of Armenia. Remember, the United Nations is an intergovernmental body, so its biggest asset is that Armenia is itself part of the UN. That means we sit on the same side of the table. We are partners, and all local UN projects are agreed upon by the Government of Armenia. The same goes for the UN framework for collaborating with civil society - a framework which is fully approved and encouraged by the government. So I would say our partnership with the Armenian leadership is quite healthy and productive.

SH: Do you think UNDP initiatives in Armenia would benefit from a strategic partnership with the Armenian Diaspora?

CV: We are already benefiting tremendously from a strategic partnership with the Diaspora. As a development agency, we identify development needs and implement concrete projects and the Diaspora joins us in funding some of them. Both the government of Armenia and the Diaspora support our priorities.

SH: What are some of the specific conduits through which the Diaspora could contribute to the success of UNDP projects?

CV: The UN has a symbiotic relationship with the Diaspora. As a development agency, we know the situation on the ground, we understand the needs, we can identify the actions to be taken. As the Diaspora is very much interested in assisting Armenia, collaboration with the UN becomes all the more natural and smooth. We have joined our respective resources, knowledge, and experience. We at the UN also take into consideration the Diaspora's views suggestions in terms of prioritizing projects.

Specific conduits through which the Diaspora can help include: addressing socio-economic inequality and supporting education, health, rural development, local self-governance, and environmental protection. Far-reaching projects in all of these programmatic areas are currently being implemented in Armenia through various UN agencies such as WHO, UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, UNFPA, and UNAIDS.

SH: Last year the UNDP launched its Global Compact Armenia project, which promotes corporate social responsibility. Recently the Compact once again yielded tangible results when VivaCell, a top Armenian corporation, joined the UNDP to fund the Arts and Crafts Center for the Disabled, with branches in Yerevan and Gyumri. What role could the Armenian business sector play in the advancement of countrywide reforms?

CV: Armenia's business sector can play a fundamental role in promoting economic vitality at the grass roots. This is about corporate social responsibility. It's about community give-back, something that's exemplified by a corporation like VivaCell. But beyond specific companies, we're striving to actively engage the business sector as a whole. For instance, we have a great partnership with the Union of Merchants and Businessmen of Armenia, which is a member of our Global Compact and a major stakeholder in our economic-development goals. Two months ago, within the framework of our efforts to foster professional growth and job creation at the grass roots, we launched our Youth Career Trail, a project that provides self-marketing training and matches young professional candidates with prospective employers. The initiative, which is jointly implemented by UNDP, the American University of Armenia (AUA), and the private sector, brought together 26 businesses which agreed to train on-the-job young university graduates. Sixty students were selected from throughout the country, and the UNDP provided them with stipends for the duration of the training. The AUA taught the students how to write resumes and market themselves to prospective employers. Six of these youths have already been offered jobs by the participating companies and the rest can start looking for jobs more confidently, having gained concrete working experience.

SH: The UNDP has a vigorous program to support the development of small and medium enterprises in Armenia, particularly in the regions. Do you plan on expanding this initiative?

CV: Yes. This is a top priority for us, because our goal of fostering economic development in the regions requires, among other, promoting and supporting entrepreneurship at the local level. Our program provides technical support to budding entrepreneurs for developing their business concepts. They also receive technical support while implementing, and collateral for accessing credit in the banking system. Later on they will return the collateral so that others can benefit from the system. This is critical for economic development. We have been working on this with the Ministry of Trade because it's part of a national program which we co-fund.

SH: Another critical assistance area in the UNDP's portfolio is sustainable community development, which comprises a host of municipal, civil society, and economic reforms, especially in Armenia's poorest communities. In your experience, and generally speaking, are Armenian stakeholders resistant to systemic change, or do they embrace it?

CV: They embrace it. When we go to communities in the regions,

people are delighted to participate in programs because we start things off with discussions of how they envision the development of their communities. I often hear them make comments such as 'We're glad somebody is asking...'. I think inclusiveness is key to our approach to sustainable community development. Citizens throughout the regions have some wonderful ideas for their own progress, and we're only too willing to listen and take note.

SH: Bureaucratic corruption in Armenia is a deeply entrenched social issue. What do you think it would take to address it effectively, if not eradicate it? What are the roles of civil society and the media in helping combat corruption?

CV: They all have a critical role to play in this area. The way to combat corruption is to have a very clear government commitment to fight against it, and to adopt a zero-tolerance approach by all citizens.

SH: The UNDP is committed to environmental protection and environmentally sustainable economic growth. In this context, what are your main challenges in Armenia?

CV: As the cost of environmental degradation has not been factored into the economy, people often don't see the point of environmental protection, so it's very difficult to make the case for ecological accountability. I think pollution and deforestation are among the main environmental challenges Armenia faces today, and hopefully immediate steps will be taken to make environmental protection a core issue in decision-making.

SH: You are also committed to the protection of human rights - particularly those of women, the poor, and disabled. What is the UNDP strategy in promoting change in this field?

CV: We have a two-pronged strategy:  
1) To work on educating the public. To work with children, civil servants, municipal servants. The idea is to create capacity at all societal levels for understanding that human rights is something that matters to all, that we are all responsible for it. This is not the responsibility of the government and of the international organizations, it is the responsibility of the people.  
2) To strengthen the capacity of the ombudsperson's office. We strive to bolster the ombudsperson's position, his role, and make him more accessible to the people. We seek to do this because the ombudsperson is the one entrusted by society to be the ultimate monitor who takes appropriate action when citizens' rights are violated.

SH: Do you believe that, after experiencing so many tribulations in the past two decades, Armenian society is ready to shift from aid dependence to genuine self-reliance?

CV: Of course. It is already doing so. There was a time when there was dependence on humanitarian aid, for entirely legitimate reasons. Whenever there was an emergency, we all came to Armenia's support. But now our work has shifted to development, poverty reduction, and fostering civic participation.

SH: What is it that you like the most about Armenia and what is it

that you dislike the most?

CV: I will answer the first question as a Latin American. I like the close-knit families, the values and the way Armenians come together on festive occasions, sharing great food and the warmth that emanates from these get-togethers.

As for the second part of the question: I dislike the traffic in Armenia. I don't understand why people drive so aggressively, why the pedestrian does not have the right of way. This is the ugly face of Armenian society, something I didn't expect to find here.

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