**2015 Resident Coordinator’s Annual Letter - Armenia**

**Brief description of major development or political and economic events that have had an effect on the work of the UNCT**

2015 was another challenging year for Armenia. Economic growth continued to slow as a result of the slowdown in Russia – Armenia’s largest trading partner and main source of cash remittances. Armenia’s economic reliance on Russia deepened when the country joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in January.

During the first nine months of the year, trade with Russia fell by 14% (compared to the same period in 2014). The World Bank estimated economic growth of 2.5% (approximately the same as in 2014) expected to slow further in 2016. Unemployment remains high at 17.6%, and although poverty has decreased, it still remains much too high (30% 2015; 32% 2014). Private remittances to Armenia from abroad are down 22%, which is a concern as they accounted for 16% of GDP in 2014. High rates of outward migration (almost 2% of population in 2014) continue to reflect a lack of economic opportunity and doubts about the future. Armenia’s ranking in the Human Development Index improved slightly (85/2015, 87/2014, out of 187) but with no discernible improvement on the ground.

The political scene was dominated by power struggles and tensions between the Government and civil society. A referendum for constitutional reform took place in December approving the transition to a parliamentary system which in theory could be a more democratic structure. But this system change could also enable the president to stay in power after his final term in 2018. The process was characterized by a lack of consultation with civil society. Opposition, civil society and international community highlighted irregularities and fraud during voting. In early 2015, the leader of the major opposition party pledged to derail the process but lost the ensuing power battle with the President and subsequently withdrew from politics. This has consolidated the power of the ruling Republican party.

Tense relations between Government and civil society spilled onto the streets in July – the civic movement of “Electric Yerevan” saw a blockade in Yerevan and drew international attention. While protesters initially objected to a 17% increase in electricity prices they also sought to highlight failings in governance. The police used violence to disperse demonstrators and detained journalists, which was heavily criticized by the international community.

Armenia’s 2nd Universal Period Review highlighted many recommendations addressing the lack of gender equality. There is limited progress in implementation of Government’s 2014-17 Human Rights Action Plan, which lacks also an M&E framework. The newly formed Gender Equality Council under the Prime Minister was upgraded, although mechanisms to engage civil society are yet to be developed. In 2015, Armenia adopted an Anti-Corruption Strategy and formed a Council under the Prime Minister, although there has been limited progress in implementing real change. Armenia did, however, win a prize at Open Government Partnership competition for improving public services.

2015 saw a sort of rapprochement with the European Union after the Government’s September 2013 decision to change course away from EU integration to EEU. A joint announcement was made to establish a new, legally binding agreement to replace the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

The past year saw the most serious escalation of hostilities over Nagorno-Karabakh in over 20 years, including the use of much heavier weaponry along the line of contact and near the northern border with Azerbaijan, resulting in higher military and civilian casualties.

As of 2015, the total number of arrivals of the displaced population from Syria, primarily of Armenian origin reached 17,000. A new wave of arrivals is expected in 2016, as an estimated 10,000-17,000 ethnic Armenians still living in Syria continue to look for ways to leave the country.
**Highlights on progress on joined up work. Summarize the three most significant achievements in delivering together for development.**

A major accomplishment of the UN Country Team in Armenia was the finalization of the new UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for 2016-2020, which was signed with the Government in July 2015. The strategy, which was developed jointly with the national counterparts, identifies four key areas of engagement for the next five years, including equitable sustainable development, democratic governance, social services and inclusion, and environmental sustainability and resilience-building. The implementation of the strategy will require a total of $119 million, of which $74 million will need to be mobilized with joint efforts of the UN and the Government of Armenia. The joint resource mobilization strategy will define the approach for closing the funding gap.

The UN Communications Group greatly strengthened its joint advocacy, especially on gender and human rights issues. This was achieved through improved coordination in marking the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign, and the Human Rights Day. As part of the campaign, over 70 different activities and events were organized across the country, including a press briefing with the key stakeholders in the government, the international community and civil society that aimed at advocating for the adoption of a stand-alone law on domestic violence in Armenia. This positioned the UN as a leading player in these important areas for Armenia, which further builds upon the important work the organization is doing in the country. Non-traditional approaches were applied throughout the campaign, such as the 24-hour theatre performances on gender related issues and the human rights ‘unconference’ on the Human Rights Day that provided fora for youth to speak and reflect about the human rights challenges in the country. More importantly, the Government and society are making progress in passing and implementing crucial legislation – on anti-discrimination, and against domestic violence. In the spirit of the Human Rights Up Front Initiative, the UN acted swiftly and issued a public statement to prevent the escalation of police violence during the ‘Electric Yerevan’ mass protests. It was also more vocal in urging the authorities in stepping up efforts in addressing discrimination against LGBTIs, and ending gender-based violence. This was achieved in coordination and sometimes lead role (and sometimes ‘behind the scenes’ role) with the international community based in Armenia, as well as with civil society.

In the economic sphere UNDP and UNIDO launched the Joint Programme on Agriculture and Rural Development supported through EU’s ENPARD instrument and the Austrian Development Agency. This program, with a total budget of EUR 3.4 mln, will strengthen the capacity of farmers associations and cooperatives in establishing agricultural and non-agricultural pilot value chains. This will contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas through creation of jobs and incomes among vulnerable rural population. It is also expected to improve the quality of agricultural inputs and production systems, increase access to local and international markets, and use of environmentally friendly farming practices. It is already planned for other UN agencies to join this initiative – for example, with WFP distributing the food produced from this program in their nationwide school feeding programme.

i) Support to the national government in the advancing the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and activities related to the 2030 agenda;

The UN supported the Government in preparing a National Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) covering the period of 2000-2014. The report indicated positive progress in areas, such as reducing child mortality, where Armenia is close to meeting its targets. National programs in immunization and child healthcare, including those supported by the UN, have helped to reduce child and infant mortality rates. A high number of targets for poverty reduction, gender equality and environment remain to be achieved, however. In general, out of the total 65 indicators, Armenia achieved 22 indicators and advanced towards achieving 10 indicators, however nearly half of the national indicators remain not achieved. The prospective national framework on the 2030 Agenda will need to reflect these realities.

The UN led the re-activation of the National Council for Sustainable Development chaired by the Prime Minister, which is the key coordinating body for sustainable development, including on the issues related
to the MDGs and the SDGs, after a period of dormancy. The Council – and therefore the Government – demonstrated its strong commitment to nationalizing the 2030 agenda by adopting a national framework on the SDGs and mainstreaming the SDGs in the existing National Strategy for Sustainable Development for 2014-2025.

The UN also launched an advocacy and communications campaign to promote public awareness about the SDGs. In November, the UN in cooperation with the American University of Armenia organized the first national Model UN competition in Armenia that brought together about 100 students aged 16-25 from 11 universities and nine high schools, and involved also the entire diplomatic corps in the country. To popularize the SDGs, the UN Communications Group organized a series of public outreach events throughout Yerevan engaging citizens in areas of high public exposure in interactive games, photo-taking and quizzes on the SDGs. A parallel social media campaign reached out to over 6,000 people, which comprises about 15% of the Armenian population aged 18-45.

The UN also worked together with the UN International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) to develop a new set of DRR indicators and align them with SDG targets. This will provide a solid ground for localization of SDGs.

ii) Support to the national government in integrating a human rights based approach in national development processes;

In January 2015, Armenia underwent its second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva. The UN played a key role in ensuring broader involvement of government agencies, civil society and respective international community in the process itself, through a series of workshops and public events. This, inter alia, contributed to the creation of a CSO coalition led by the Open Society Institute, comprising up to 60 organizations, grouped into UPR thematic areas. This allowed for a more targeted follow-up and collaboration of the CSOs with respective government agencies.

The UN also provided continuous support to the Government on coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the first-ever National Human Rights Action Plan, which was created under the auspices of the UN. Through a series of round-table discussions and workshops the UN is leading ‘behind the scenes’ the first truly comprehensive and accountable dialogue between government and civil society on all human rights issues. The UN supported the Ministry of Justice, as the coordination government agency for the implementation of the Action Plan, to introduce progress evaluation and assessment tools, including through a set-up of thematic mini-public councils.

The UN also supported the Government in integrating a human rights based approach in developing state policy in areas such as social protection, health, education, child care. More specifically, a number of laws and strategies, drafted and advocated with UN support, were passed throughout 2015, most notably the Law on Social Assistance, the National Development Programme for Education, the 2016-2020 National Health Policy, the Child and Adolescent Health and Development Strategy, and the Law on Refugees. Also the UN Gender Theme Group, following the request from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, completed the assessment of the implementation of two national strategies on gender equality and domestic violence for 2011-2015 to inform the Government’s efforts in formulating the next five-year strategy.

In May 2015, Armenia hosted the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The final report of her visit based on the meetings with the representatives of the government and civil society, and visits to child care centers in three cities of Armenia highlighted the need for establishing a robust national child protection system in the country, among other recommendations.

iii) Progress on preparedness, crisis and Post-crisis transition results achieved in cooperation with UN peacekeeping, peace building, political, and humanitarian actors
In the context of heightened tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and further suppression of civil society in Azerbaijan, direct contact between civil society groups between the two countries has steadily declined. In response the UN in Armenia led the UN’s first ever effort dialogue between civil society between the two countries, bringing in DPA/NY, UN in Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the Regional Hub into this extremely sensitive, but extremely important initiative. We organized a series of roundtable discussions between the civil society groups from the three countries in Tbilisi. The discussions focused on the SDGs, which provided a politically neutral and universally accepted entry point for the UN to facilitate intra-regional civil society engagement under the UN auspices. The meetings brought together around 20 leading civil society representatives, who discussed a broad range of issues related to the common development challenges in the sub-region, advocacy on nationalizing the SDGs, monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs and proposing concrete ideas for sub-regional cooperation in areas such as environmental protection, education, health, and youth. In future, this initiative can potentially create space for the UN to explore more concrete Track-Two engagements specifically focusing on conflict prevention in the Nagorno-Karabakh context as well as possible rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey.

The UN also explored the possibility of mediating a potential initiative between Armenia and Turkey that aims at preservation of Armenian cultural heritage in the east of Turkey. If materialized, the initiative will serve as an important symbolic step that would contribute to reinvigorating the dialogue and the normalizing the relations between the two countries.

In 2015, Armenia became a member of the UN International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) after the Armenian Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team successfully passed a classification exercise and was classified as a Medium USAR Team. During large disasters, the USAR will serve as a coordination body for managing the humanitarian efforts amongst the international community, including search and rescue. Throughout the qualification process, the efforts of the national counterpart, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations, were strongly supported by the UN in Armenia through close cooperation with INSARAG Secretariat. In addition to its overall importance for the country, this membership carries a highly symbolic meaning for Armenia, considering that the idea of INSARAG originated and materialized following the devastating earthquake in the town Spitak in the north of Armenia in 1988.

Results of joined up approaches: To illustrate the impact of joined up work, describe the results of joined up approaches of the UNCT.

With assistance from UNDP and FAO, Armenia conducted the first-ever comprehensive Agricultural Census in Armenia that would provide sound benchmark data on the situation and role of agriculture in the country for evidence-based policy making. The national capacity for collection and analysis of agricultural statistics, maintenance of animal identification system and a farm register were also strengthened. This is essential for Armenia, where agriculture accounts for up to 20% of GDP and employs about 45% of the population.

In 2015, the UN (Unicef, UNDP) continued to support the Government in piloting an internationally accepted framework for classifying the functionality, disability and health of persons with disabilities in line with the principles of UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. The new framework will allow people with disabilities to realize their potential for more active functioning and participation vis-a-vis a passive service recipient. Upon completion of the pilot stage in 2016, the model is expected to be gradually scaled up nationwide. Also, UN advocated for recruitment of persons with disabilities as part of a UN-driven initiative facilitating access of university graduates to labour market. In turn, UN recruited interns with disabilities in an effort to improve participation and representation of individuals from disadvantages communities in the staffing of the UN.

In March, the UN assisted and provided high-level advisory services to the Armenian delegation all the way through the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) in Sendai, Japan. During
the conference, the city of Stenapavan was recognized as a role model for city resilience. The country also adopted the Sendai Framework for DRR 2015-2030, with implementation to start in 2016.

The UN organized a comprehensive outreach campaign for **celebration of the UN 70th anniversary** and exponentially increased its visibility among the Armenian public. Interviews with heads of UN agencies and reports on the UN activity in Armenia were broadcast by leading media outlets in the country accompanied by increased outreach efforts in social media. As a result of a partnership with a leading local magazine, a UN-themed issue was published about to raise public awareness about the work of the UN in Armenia and the world, reaching out to over 25,000 Armenians. Armenia also participated in the Turn the World UN Blue by having three of its landmarks illuminate in blue, including the ruins of the 7th century Zvartnots Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

i) Highlight new partnerships formed in 2015

The UN agencies have been working increasingly closely together to identify areas of common interest. On-going cooperation between UNDP and UNHCR on UNDP’s **Integrated Border Management Project** successfully pairs infrastructure development inter alia upgraded border crossing points with UNCHR’s technical advice and specialized training of border guards on protection related issues.

In view of common strategic priorities and comparative advantages, UNDP and UNICEF signed a memorandum of understanding with the Asian Development Bank on collaboration on the **Seismic Safety Improvement Program in Armenia** as part of a USD 85 million loan agreement with the Government. The program will support the implementation of the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction by improving school seismic safety to reduce casualties and damages in schools during earthquakes and to enable better use of school buildings as shelters for general public and focal points for emergency response after earthquakes. Negotiations are underway for the Government to allocate funds to the UN to support the construction of a pilot school that meets all the technical criteria.

Building upon the success of UNDP’s **Youth Career Trail Initiative** - a paid internship program run during the period of 2007-2014, UNDP, UNHCR and Armenian Missionary Association of America formed a tri-partite partnership to launch a new cycle of the initiative that will create employment opportunities for youth. As a result of this partnership, around 60 fresh graduates, mostly displaced youth from Syria and Ukraine, will be offered six-month paid internships in private companies in Armenia.

   ii) Highlight results of joint resource mobilization where possible

The UN Country Team continued working closely together to improve cooperation on the basis of comparative advantages in resource mobilization, thereby reducing inter-agency competition for resources. The work on putting together a **joint resource mobilization strategy** started in the final quarter of 2015.

With a view to support the Government in the implementation of its national human rights agenda and international commitments, UNDP in partnership with UNICEF and UNFPA started negotiations with the EU Delegation in Armenia for a **joint human rights project**. The project is developed considering the Government’s commitments under the national human rights strategy and 2014-17 Human Rights Action Plan, as well as international human rights mechanisms. The project will support formulation and implementation of inclusive policies and monitoring mechanisms in the human rights sector, thereby contributing to long-term positive changes in the society.

The UN also secured a commitment from the **European Investment Bank** to support an integrated border management initiative in Armenia with the loan extended to the Government. If materialized, the initiative will engage UNDP and UNHCR.

In 2015, UNDP alone mobilized about USD 11 mln. from **European and Russian donors**. The latter provided USD 5 mln. mobilized to improve livelihoods of about 62,000 people living in 45 bordering
communities in the region of Tavush in the north of Armenia, affected by the conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh. There is high potential to engage other UN agencies in this five-year project by identifying complementary areas. For instance, buckwheat and other agricultural plants, which will be cultivated by the farmers in the region, can potentially be absorbed by WFP’s School Feeding Program.

iii) Highlight innovations in programme and operations to address key development challenges

The UN in Armenia continues to apply and mainstream social innovation throughout development programs. Application of social innovation tools helped unlock more opportunities for citizen participation and impact. Kolba Lab empowered a network of over 5,000 citizens and public servants to test and prototype reform ideas on public administration, human rights and the green economy through social innovation camps and hackathons. Armenia’s case was presented at a side event on social innovation during the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2015.

The UN in Armenia co-initiated a regional initiative, covering Armenia, Georgia, Macedonia and Moldova, that promotes labs as a new model of Government-citizen collaboration to address the problem of lack of civic engagement and influence in policy making. Labs will work as an interface between governments and citizens to support and co-develop public service delivery, new social enterprises and bring in additional resources and networks.

A new partnership with the European Union will scale results and embed them in Government through an Open Government Centre to be established in 2016. The Government has committed to apply the UNDP piloted SMS-polling tool for Open Government Partnership. Six communities in Armenia are already applying the tool with a database of more than 5,500 registered residents.

The UN continued looking for non-conventional ways of advocacy. In 2015, UN worked with TEDx Yerevan Team to organize a TEDx salon event focusing on climate change and environment. The event brought together about 150 people, including environmental experts, civil society leaders, government officials, and academics, and raised important questions about the environmental situation in Armenia.

The Operations Management Team also improved disability access to the UN House by building an additional ramp and bathroom facilities for people with disabilities. This was achieved in close consultation with leading civil society groups advocating for the rights of people with disabilities to ensure that all the necessary requirements and standards are considered in the process of construction.

Upcoming opportunities for 2016: Indicate potential upcoming opportunities for the UN Country Team to support national partners in integrated development policy and programme development

In the coming year, the UN Country Team will liaise closely with the Government to develop and implement 2016 UNDAF Annual Work Plans. This will be achieved through the set-up of new UNDAF Results Groups in January and the Joint Steering Committee in February.

The UN will work closely together to further apply some of the key elements of the Delivering as One approach, such as Communicating as One and Operating as One. The strategies on joint resource mobilization and joint communication and outreach that will support the implementation of the new UNDAF will be finalized in 2016. Also, the UN agencies will enhance cooperation by following up on the important work in identifying additional opportunities and linkages between the work of UN agencies for joint programming in areas such as human rights, integrated border management, food security and nutrition, integration of the displaced population from Syria seeking protection in Armenia.

In 2016, the UN will continue enhancing its leading role in coordinating development assistance in Armenia. Building upon the strategic partnership with the Vice Prime Minister, who has been co-chairing the Development Partners’ Coordination Forum since 2015, more efforts will be invested in improving the coordination of development partners in general and the ten thematic areas specifically. Necessary steps will be taken together with the Prime Minister’s Office and the donor community based in Armenia to set up a real-time online information management system to track development assistance provided to
Armenia, thereby ensuring improved coordination and precluding duplication of efforts among the
development partners.

In 2016, the UN will continue to provide continuous, enhanced and cohered support to the Government in
nationalizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and integrating it into key national
development strategies and processes. To this end, the UN will work closely with the National Council for
Sustainable Development. The National Progress Report on the MDGs will be launched in February
followed by the organization of a stakeholder dialogue meeting on the SDGs to discuss the lessons learnt
from the implementation of the MDGs and to identify the priority needs and goals for the country. The Youth Advisory Panel will also be engaged in promoting the SDGs among young people by soliciting
technology-driven solutions to development challenges via social innovation camps.

With the increasing tensions in the region, the UN will continue playing the role of a neutral broker in
facilitating dialogue between civil society groups in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The UN will continue
organizing the sub-regional roundtable discussions on the SDGs in the South Caucasus, which will
hopefully set the stage for increased interaction among the countries in the region and enhanced sub-
regional cooperation in the area of sustainable development.

The UN will support the national counterparts in developing the next national strategy for gender equality
and domestic violence, and also continue working with development partners and civil society to advocate
for the adoption of a stand-alone law on domestic violence. The UN will continue working closely with
the Government to develop a concept for state policy and pass the bill on sex-selective abortion in the
country that has one of the highest rates in the world. The female candidates for local government, supported
via a UN initiative on women’s empowerment, will run for office in local council elections in 2016.

The UN Country Team will be preparing to host senior UN officials to the country as part of their regional
visits.