

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS
TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

MKHITAR SEBASTATSI EDUCATIONAL COMPLEX

HIGH SCHOOL

RESEARCH PROJECT

TOPIC: **BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS
TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN
AND MARZES**

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Content

Introduction

Empowering youth and creating opportunities.

- BIGGER THAN US
- Meznits Aravel
- Background
- Project Overview
- Addressing Early Marriage in Yezidi Community

Expanding Our Reach

Empowering youth and fostering dialogue across Armenia.

Education and Prospects of Youth in Armenia

Education in Urban and Rural Settlements.

Aspirations

Creating positive change.

Why is This Topic Important

Fostering dialogue and providing opportunities for youth are making a real difference.

- Marzes
- Yezidi Community

Youth Development in Armenia

Issues youth face in Armenia and the need for comprehensive policies to overcome them.

Action Plan

Spider Web

Early Merriage in Yezidi Community

Significant negative impact of early marriage on the lives of Yezidi girls and boys

Bibliography

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

Introduction

In Armenia, many youths, especially in rural regions and minority communities, face limited opportunities. The Meznits Aravel project seeks to bridge this gap by empowering these young individuals with the skills and resources they need to create positive change in their communities.

Through cross-regional school visits, projects travels, and research, I witnessed how immense the difference between our opportunities is and how limited their opportunities are. Informational tubes that inform us of various opportunities are absent there, they need to be made aware of the existing opportunities.

The lack of opportunities for Armenian youth in the region is a concern that needs to be addressed. There is a consensus that retaining youth in regional locations is crucial for building sustainable communities¹.

However, the lack of employment opportunities is a dominant cause for the limited potential of youth in rural areas². This lack of opportunities is not unique to Armenia, as other regions such as Australia and Africa also face similar challenges. In Australia, regional youth have limited access to digital technologies and higher education, which hinders their employability in the rapidly developing digital economy³.

In Africa, creating opportunities for the growing youth requires regional integration policies and investment in science and technology education⁴.

Therefore, addressing the lack of opportunities for Armenian youth in the region requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving employment prospects, enhancing access to education and technology, and promoting regional integration and innovation.

In our journey with conducting Project Design and Management crash courses⁵, and motivating them to strive for greater success we saw the change happening, they took the lead

¹ [Prioritizing a Continuum of Care for Older Orphan Populations: A Qualitative Study from Two Transitional Centers in Armenia](#)

² [ՀՀ երիտասարդների սոցիալական ադապտացիան հետպատերազմյան իրականությունում. սոցիոլոգիական վերլուծություն / Social adaptation of Armenian youth in the post-war reality. Sociological analysis](#)

³ [Youth-Focused Programs in Collectivist Cultures: Can Youth-Focused Intervention Lead to Significant Change in Vulnerable Rural Communities in Armenia?](#)

⁴ [Социальное участие студентов России и Армении: институциональный контекст и нереализованный потенциал некоммерческого сектора в социокультурном развитии региональных городов](#)

⁵ [Syunik](#)

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

and started their projects in remote Kndzoresk, in Kornidzor, and that is how we knew we were on the right path. We need to expand our reach to gather more people interested in the project's mission and ready to contribute to creating this chain of sustainable development.

BIGGER THAN US

The BIGGER THAN US⁶ documentary served as a catalyst, showing that youth armed with determination and commitment can achieve huge changes even with limited resources, proving my belief that strong and educated youth are assets to their countries and architects of a brighter future.

What is Meznits Aravel

Meznits Aravel is a movement born from the understanding that the potential within Armenia's youth is vast and untapped. After completing our first project year, we realized that our mission is not just about conducting workshops; it's about opening doors to opportunities previously unknown to many.

Through our journey, we become ambassadors for a global documentary. Meznits Aravel⁷ is more than a project; It's a movement to nurture a generation that understands its worth, recognizes its potential, and is ready to bring positive change.

Background

The project was inspired by the stark differences in opportunities witnessed during cross-regional visits and research. Through Project Design and Management crash courses, Meznits Aravel aims to empower youth to strive for greater success. The documentary film "Bigger Than Us" served as a catalyst, showing how determined youth can achieve significant changes even with limited resources. This realization led to the birth of Meznits Aravel, a movement to nurture a generation of change-makers.

Project Overview

Meznits Aravel conducts Project Design and Management crash courses, screens the "Bigger Than Us" documentary, and facilitates dialogue between different regions in Armenia. The project has already succeeded, with one group starting an environmental care project in Khndzoresk. By expanding its reach, Meznits Aravel hopes to gather more individuals interested in its mission to create a chain of sustainable development.

Addressing Early Marriage in the Yezidi Community⁸

Early marriage is a significant issue in the Yezidi community, particularly in rural areas, where girls are often forced to marry at a young age, leading to school dropouts and limited opportunities. Efforts to address this include educational programs, legal reforms, and

⁶ [Bigger Than Us](#)

⁷ [Meznits Aravel](#)

⁸ [Early marriage in the Yezidi community](#)

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

community outreach to raise awareness and empower youth to make informed decisions about their futures.

Expanding Reach and Impact

After completing its first project year, Meznits Aravel plans to expand its reach to more regions in Armenia, fostering a dialogue between the capital city and rural areas. By equipping youth with the skills and knowledge they need to create positive change, Meznits Aravel aims to empower a generation of Armenians who understand their worth and potential.

Education and Prospects of Youth in Armenia

The school-age population will increase in Yerevan by 11.2%, while decreasing in the urban and rural settlements of the Marzes by 16.8% and 13.2%, respectively. 79% (5-9) graders enrolled in secondary school education in 2020, Armenia has a significant number of very small schools. In 2020, 6.3% of schools had 20 or fewer pupils, where only 0.3% of all pupils were enrolled⁹. I did not know that until I visited remote Slsyan in Syuniq(13,179 by 2022) Marz, where the school only had 12 students.

Aspirations

Change Starts With You

All youngsters are future leaders, and every one of us is a changemaker, youngsters have immense curiosity, fearlessness, and creativity which gives us the ability and potential to create positive change. However in the regions, as the statistics show, youngsters are not given the tools.

Half of the world's population is below the age of 25 ready to make the change. But why is the change not happening fast enough? My question is why are there plenty of people not paying attention?

If we give youngsters the resources and tools they can make positive change. I wanted to create a tool for them to discover their potential and put their ideas into action.

As any youngster filled with curiosity and passion, I always wondered what I could do to be useful in this world and what my purpose was. I wanted to contribute to the development of something.

⁹ [EDUCATION SECTOR ANALYSIS FOR ARMENIA](#) page 19/ Analysis of school (preschool) enrollment, school (preschool) coverage, and internal efficiency with a focus on social equity

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

Through cross-regional school visits, project travels, and research, I witnessed how immense the difference between the capital city of Yerevan and regional opportunities are and how limited their opportunities are. Informational tubes that inform us of various opportunities are absent there, they need to be made aware of the existing opportunities, and this plays a major role not only in the development of the country but also in the empowerment of the youth who are the future leaders.

On Human Rights Day, I participated in the screening of a documentary film called "BIGGER THAN US." Even the name triggered me. It was about Melati Wisjen, who started fighting against plastic abuse at a very young age and later achieved huge changes in her country in Indonesia by starting a project called "Bye Bye Plastic Bags." She travels all over the world to find her peers who also achieved huge changes in their communities through their determination and commitment, even with little resources. That was a huge discovery for me. I understood that youth in developing countries, relying on their strengths and determination, can achieve huge changes without help from the outside. I also understood that strong and educated youth are one of the biggest assets of a country.

So what did I do next?

I started my movement. I started from my community, my school. I wanted to gather motivated peers to travel all over Armenia and exchange ideas, opportunities, experiences, and energies. After a few weeks of hard work, I gathered a wonderful team. We soon designed a Project Design and Management training workshop with the resources we had, so we had the materials to teach and give back to our communities. We went to Syunik first. We visited four border villages: (Kordnidzor, Kaashen, Khndzoresk) stayed there for four days, and conducted workshops in three different schools. One of them has already started their project for environmental care in Kndzoresk.

We had a few success stories in such a limited time.

In our journey with conducting Project Design and Management crash courses, where they learned what is a community, its advantages and disadvantages, and what they can use to create the change. leading exchange training, and motivating them to strive for greater success we saw the change happening, they took the lead and started their projects in remote Kndzoresk, in Kornidzor, and that is how we knew we were on the right path.

We saw the change happening, but we need the change to happen fast enough.

Meznits Aravel is a movement born from the understanding that the potential within Armenia's youth is vast and untapped. After completing our first project year, we realized that

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

our mission is not just about conducting workshops; it's about opening doors to education and opportunities previously unknown to many.

Meznits Aravel is more than a project; it's a movement toward positive change. Through our journey, we become ambassadors for a global documentary. As we plan to screen "Bigger Than Us" and conduct more workshops, we're determined to empower youth in Armenia. It is an effort to nurture a generation that understands their worth, recognizes their potential, and is equipped to bring positive change.

To our surprise, we got a message from the "Bigger Than Us" film director herself and became the ambassadors of the movement in Armenia. 'Meznits Aravel,' which means that our works are more than us.

Meznits Aravel is more than just a project; it's a movement to empower Armenia's youth and create a brighter future for the country. By providing opportunities and resources to those who need them most, Meznits Aravel is helping to unlock the untapped potential within Armenia's youth, paving the way for a better tomorrow.

We are the change!

Why Is This Topic Important

Marzes:

The school-age population will increase in Yerevan by 11.2%, while decreasing in the urban and rural settlements of the Marzes by 16.8% and 13.2%, respectively. 79% (5-9) graders enrolled in secondary school education in 2020, Armenia has a significant number of very small schools. In 2020, 6.3% of schools had 20 or fewer pupils, where only 0.3% of all pupils were enrolled. By having these statistics, it is clear that in the Marzes youth is not getting the tools they need to build a prosperous future for them.

Meznits Aravel prospects are to empower the youth to set their ideas into action and discover their potential thus creating positive change and developing their communities. It all starts with us paying attention. If everyone does their part, no matter how small, towards positive change, together we can change the world. Together we can contribute to the development of the Marzes!

Yezidi Community:

During one of my journeys, I met my lovely friend Liana. She was consistently discussing and raising awareness about the Ezidi community, and being a part of it. I encountered her at the RoA National Assemblies program. Once, she mentioned, 'While I am here debating various political topics with you, my peers are getting married and having children.'

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

Early marriage is one of the factors significantly conducive to school dropouts, essentially among girls. In the Yezidi community, it is common for girls to marry at the age of 13-15. As a rule, girls who get married at a tender age are forced to leave school immediately, without any prospect of further education, preventing them from completing high school and pursuing their dreams. Are their stories being neglected?'

This was a story about the biggest minority in Armenia from all 11 minorities living in Armavir, Aragatsotn, Ararat, Kotayk, and Shirak regions of Armenia, more than 35.000 people. In approx 3 million population of Armenia.

Youth outside of Yerevan in the Regions of Armenia. In rural areas, many of my peers need to be made aware of the opportunities awaiting them to grasp and experience.

I strongly believe that each of them is full of potential—they are our future change-makers and the ones we need to invest in.

I want them to be aware of the stories happening in 'Bigger Than Us.' I aspire to create or become the tool for their development, knowing that our country's and the world's future depends on them. BIGGER THAN US is a registered trademark, a film distributed in 57 countries, a website, and thousands of community screening and debates. Potentially a community. There are a lot of projects building on BIGGER THAN US. It is much more than a film.

Empowering youth, particularly in rural regions and minority communities, is not just a duty but an imperative; by shedding light on untold stories and unlocking their untapped potential, we pave the way for a future where every individual becomes a catalyst for positive change.

One of the main goals of my project is to create a dialogue between the regions in Armenia and the capital city, to create a network of strong young professionals.

We Travel all over Armenia and conduct Project Design and Management crash courses, and in the future will screen a documentary called BIGGER THAN US that will not only motivate but will also give the youngsters the tools to develop their projects and communities.

At the end of each project year, we conduct panel discussions and invite adult professionals to present our work and develop new ideas and action plans.

In our journey, we already conducted our crash courses in Syuniq regions in 3 different villages, and one of the groups at Khndzoresk started their project for environmental care. At the

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

end of the project year, we hosted a captivating panel discussion that brought together distinguished individuals from various fields.

During our panel discussion, we hosted the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, renowned Spyurk Research Center doctoral professors, and the Language Committee's leading professional. The panel discussion served as a platform for insightful dialogue, focusing on the objectives of Meznits Aravel, and our works and the experience which fostered a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives.

This year after being contacted by the BIGGER THAN US film director herself we became the ambassadors of Bigger than Us in Armenia. Now we are planning to screen the BIGGER THAN US documental film, get the students to know the stories in the film conduct the Project Design and Management crash courses, and help the groups with their further project creation with different exchange trips and workshops.

Youth Development in Armenia

Youth policy requires a very strong local and regional development perspective, with targeted approaches to the situation of rural youth (including the particular case of border villages) and youth living in disadvantaged urban settlements. In this context, migration and population decline are issues of key importance. Hence, youth policy, migration policy, and diaspora engagement/reintegration policy are closely interlinked. 4. Youth policy should be more than a document: it needs to form a basis for planning and implementing programs that support youth, with clear prioritization of youth-related results and activities in the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework and the Government's partnerships with all international actors.

In general, the youth policy views young people in Armenia mainly as a problem¹⁰, while in the modern approaches popular among young people, the philosophy of perceiving youth as a resource¹¹ and potential is predominant¹².

Action Plan

After completing our first project year, we decided to expand our reach to more regions in Armenia, fostering a dialogue between the capital city and the various regions. One of our project's goals is to facilitate this connection.

¹⁰ [ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՕՐԵՆՔԸ ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԱՍԻՆ](#)

¹¹ [EU Youth Strategy](#)

¹² [Youth policy](#)

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

To achieve this, in the upcoming year, we plan to gather motivated peers interested in the project's mission, ready to contribute. We will organize 3-day hybrid sessions, focusing on Project Design and Management crash courses. After completing the workshop successfully, participants will be equipped to conduct crash courses, mandated to cover at least one high school in the regions of Armenia. Afterward, they'll have the freedom to conduct as many crash courses as they wish, wherever they desire.

Enrollment will conclude by the end of September, followed by the Training of Trainers (TOT) in October. Starting in November, we will have 10 months to visit a minimum of 3 regions in Armenia, conducting Project Design and Management crash courses, screening the 'Bigger Than Us' documentary film in at least 9 villages, and hosting at least 3 workshops in Yerevan. We aim to reach over 140 youngsters by the end of the project year.

The project will unfold in three main stages: enrollment, TOT, and implementation. We plan to conclude the project year with an evaluation, celebration, and panel discussion. In the Yezidi community in Armenia, early marriage has been a traditional practice, although its prevalence has been decreasing in recent years. However, it persists in some areas, particularly in rural and conservative communities.

Early Marriage in Yezidi Community

The legal minimum age for marriage in Armenia has been 18 for men and women since April 2013; before this, the minimum age had been 17 years for women. Someone aged 16 or 17 can marry, if they have permission from their parents or legal guardian¹³.

Child Marriage in Armenia (Summary) 2 Only civil marriages are legally recognized in Armenia, though religious marriages are also traditionally performed. Under the Criminal Code, sexual intercourse or other sexual acts with a person 'obviously under 16' (according to the legal wording) by a person who is over 18 years of age is illegal. No information was found on how effectively this law is implemented. There is no specific legislation dealing with forced marriage.

Rates of child marriage are much higher among the Yezidi minority than among the general population in Armenia; in addition, rates of unregistered marriages are also very high in these communities. Yezidis live mainly in rural communities. The Yezidi population is estimated to be between 40,000 and 60,000. Focus group discussions with Yezidi women revealed that for Yezidis, marriage is considered more important than an education, particularly for girls and women; as such, girls are taken out of school at a young age. Commonly Yezidi women do not work, and can only do so if their husbands give permission; this is a tradition that is still strong today. Boys are also usually taken out of school after 8th grade. Yezidi girls usually marry at the

¹³ [ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԸՆԴՀԱՆՍՈՒՅՑԱԿԱՆ ՕՐԵՆՍՊՐԵՈՒՄ ՓՈՓՈԽՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԿԱՏԱՐԵԼՈՒ ՄԱՍԻՆ](#)

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

age of 13–14 years old, while boys marry at the age of 17–20. In most cases, marriages are arranged by parents. For this group, the key impact of child marriage is early childbearing. Yezidi women want – and are expected – to have as many children as possible, as this is considered women’s main role. Yezidis usually live six to eight months out of the year in remote pastures, tending to sheep and cattle, during which time it is difficult for them to access health facilities, including prenatal and neonatal care. Child spouses and their babies are particularly vulnerable, as pregnancy and birth are dangerous for girls whose bodies are not yet physically mature.

Raising the minimum marriage age. Recently the Armenian government raised the legal age of marriage for women from 17 to 18 years old, the same age as for men. In addition, all children are now expected to complete 12 years of schooling.

Recommendations • Improve sexual education for young people. This could include enlarging the geographical area covered by projects offering youth and adolescent reproductive health education, especially in bordering marzes. Also, the rights of women should be considered as an important factor in family formulation issues. • Ensure the collection of more specific gender- and child-related statistics. • Increase the number of youth-friendly centers (YFC) especially in marzes and rural communities to help young couples with family planning and reproductive health issues. The scope of similar projects run by international organizations focused on reproductive health and family planning issues for youth and adolescents should be extended and firm cooperation with local governance authorities is highly welcomed. • Develop mechanisms to increase the low level of awareness of family planning and reproductive health issues among national minorities, refugees, and other vulnerable groups, with the active participation of community leaders, local governance authorities, and NGOs. The development of relevant mechanisms should be incorporated into national and territorial development policies as well. • Improve legislation and enforcement mechanisms to address underage married women as children concerning protecting their rights¹⁴.

Early marriage can have significant negative impacts on the lives of Yezidi girls and boys. For girls, early marriage often means the end of their education and the beginning of responsibilities associated with marriage and household duties. This can limit their opportunities for personal and professional development and can lead to social isolation.

For boys, early marriage can also have negative consequences. They may be forced to assume adult responsibilities at a young age, such as providing for their families financially. This can put pressure on them and limit their ability to pursue education and career opportunities.

Both girls and boys in the Yezidi community may perceive early marriage as a cultural expectation that they are expected to fulfill. There may be social pressure to conform to this expectation, and those who resist may face stigma or ostracism from their community.

¹⁴[Child Marriage in Armenia](#)

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

Efforts to address early marriage in the Yezidi community in Armenia include educational programs, legal reforms, and community outreach. These efforts aim to raise awareness about the negative impacts of early marriage and to empower girls and boys to make informed decisions about their futures.

The Yezidi community in Armenia is primarily concentrated in the Armavir and Aragatsotn marzes (provinces), as well as in the capital city of Yerevan. They have been living in Armenia for centuries, with many having arrived during the Ottoman period as refugees fleeing persecution and violence. The exact number of Yezidis living in Armenia is not well-documented, but estimates suggest that there are between 35,000 and 50,000 Yezidis in the country. The Yezidi community has maintained its distinct cultural and religious identity in Armenia, despite facing challenges such as discrimination and economic hardship. In recent years, there has been a trend of Yezidis leaving Armenia due to economic difficulties and seeking better opportunities abroad. This has led to concerns about the preservation of Yezidi culture and heritage in Armenia. Efforts are being made to support the Yezidi community and encourage them to stay in Armenia, including through cultural and educational initiatives¹⁵.

Meznits Aravel
Laura Trosyan
Armen Voskaynyan

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¹⁵ [Հայաստանում եզդիական համայնքում վաղ ամուսնությունների և պարտադիր կրթությունից դուրս մնալու հիմնախնդիրները](#)

BIGGER THAN US & MEZNITS ARAVEL: AS TOOLS TO BRIDGE YOUTH IN YEREVAN AND MARZES

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[Syunik](#)

[Bigger Than Us](#)

[Meznits Aravel](#)

[Early marriage in the Yezidi community](#)

[EDUCATION SECTOR ANALYSIS FOR ARMENIA](#) page 19/ Analysis of school (preschool) enrollment, school (preschool) coverage, and internal efficiency with a focus on social equity

[ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՕՐԵՆՔԸ ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԱՍԻՆ](#)

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