



PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

MAY 2012

Nagorny Karabakh conflict and frontline areas

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES progress on finding a resolution to the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) conflict has proved elusive. The unresolved conflict continues to evolve and pose persistent and shifting challenges on the ground, including insecurity, long-term displacement, ingrained mistrust and serious limits on development and regional opportunities. Since fighting ended in 1994, there has been an uneasy situation of 'no war, no peace' between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

The geography of the NK conflict has resulted in two distinct border contexts (see map). One features a heavily militarised and entrenched Line of Contact (LOC) along a fiercely contested *de facto* border deep inside internationally recognised Azerbaijani territory, where mostly one side (Azerbaijan) has a civilian population. The second features civilian populations living on either side of the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which although also closed and militarised is less tense and offers more opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation.

This brief highlights the potential for a number of key confidence building measures (CBMs); both military (joint investigation, sniper withdrawal) and civilian (resource management). Military CBMs are clearly required and expected by the international community; without cooperation on them, the sides are only undermining their own international standing. Cooperation is also urgently required on issues around missing persons and the measures each side needs to take when remains are found in the front-line area.

Findings and recommendations in this policy brief and accompanying report were drawn from consultations and interviews conducted in early 2012 among people directly affected by the conflict, both in a number of Azerbaijani villages near the LOC and in frontline areas in Tovuz and Gazakh districts on the Azerbaijani side of the international border; and also in villages in Tavush region on the Armenian side of the border. Consultations and discussion groups were also carried out in NK, in the same time-frame and in several locations.

The European Union (EU) is a significant donor and political actor in the region and is well placed to play a key role in support of an eventual agreement mediated by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Co-Chairs (France, Russia, US). The EU could do more to promote the case for CBMs, in support of and in full complementarity with the Minsk Group and the framework agreement (the Madrid principles).

KEY OUTCOMES

- **CBMs need to happen, where possible, independently of the broader more intractable political frameworks**, to help create the conditions for a sustainable peace agreement.
- **The EU can and should play a more active role in promoting the practical benefits of CBMs for conflict-affected people**, as part of its support for the OSCE Minsk Group, and challenge more the use of militant rhetoric.
- **Local people living near the Line of Contact require special attention from both government and international donors**, as they face a double vulnerability, related to both security and livelihoods.
- **Improving governance, including in the security, justice and economic sectors**, is essential for peaceful and normalised development in the region.

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"Local voices in society must be heard. We hope that the authorities take our views into account."

Karabakh Armenian resident,
Krasniy Bazar, January 2012

Findings and Recommendations

1.

CBMs need to happen, where possible, independently of the broader more intractable political frameworks, to help create the conditions for a sustainable peace agreement.

If CBMs are tied to progress on the wider political strand, they are unlikely to happen and will not exercise their intended effect of making that progress more likely. Underlying the findings in this study is a basic question about how the sides understand CBMs, and indeed, why the authorities at least appear to believe that certain CBMs are not in their interests.

For some local participants on either side of the conflict, for whom their day-to-day existence is a constant challenge, the case for implementing CBMs is viewed, albeit implicitly, in terms of the potential for practical steps to improve their situation.

"There were seasons when we could not harvest our crops at all [because of the shootings]. Once they see a tractor or a combine-harvester working in the field, they shoot it... We have to work on our lands at nights, like thieves."

Azeri resident, Gapanly village (Tartar district), January 2012

Local research raises questions as to whether and to what extent CBMs should be explored as a strategy in the Armenia-Azerbaijan international border context irrespective of whether they could apply in the LOC context. Clearly, what is needed is a more evolved and defined understanding, on both sides, of what CBMs mean. On the one hand, the sides have at least affirmed, on several occasions, a degree of support for CBMs. But part of a more defined understanding should entail a combination of the more 'legalistic' approach (holding politicians to their words) and the persuasive approach, highlighting the potential benefits.

"The water from the artesian wells in the village is salty. We want to go and repair the pipeline at night, but our military does not let us, because the area is mined."

Azeri resident, Kemerli village (Gazakh district), January 2012

A view expressed in the accompanying report is that by tying military CBMs in the frontline to progress in political negotiations, Azerbaijan is applying aspects of a 'package' approach, i.e. insisting on the simultaneous movement across a range of tracks, rather than accepting an incremental approach, in relation to the implementation of CBMs. That, in turn, contributes to the prolonging of an inherently unstable status quo, with significant risks for authorities on all sides, and continued losses for ordinary citizens. All parties have opportunities, as evidenced in the current research in local areas, to engage on CBMs resulting in no significant loss of strategic advantage, while holding out the possibility of strengthening their image as credible and reliable actors.

"We need to achieve reconciliation at the national level to prevent renewal of hostilities. [For that to happen] the foreign diplomatic policies of both parties have to function well. Our intentions alone are unable to yield positive results; consent of both parties is needed."

Armenian resident, Berdavan village (Tavush region), January 2012

A particular point in the Azerbaijani analysis is that confidence-building measures involving militaries and civilian administrations on both sides of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, aimed primarily at supporting the safety and security of the local civilian populations, could be relatively easier to realise. If these work, the cooperative relationship that could stem from such military CBMs on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border could then be used to set up similar arrangements in the NK context as well. This idea does not emerge in the same way from the interviews and discussions held in Armenia, yet this does not mean that the idea should be ruled out: there is a clear need for steps that lead to concrete improvements in ordinary

people's lives, and such CBMs could be a vehicle for achieving such changes.

"We cannot make long-term plans, we live one day at a time. We feel constant worry for the future of our children."

Interviewee, Karabakh Armenian research, January 2012

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reconsider current understandings of CBMs in order to achieve their potential as a device for establishing predictable protocols of behaviour on issues and in contexts independent of headline political issues.
- The EU should encourage governing authorities to work with local government and NGOs to identify locally relevant policy areas where cooperation resulting in practical benefits for local populations may be possible; these areas may include water sharing, reconstruction of irrigation canals on the border, joint action against environmental pollution, fighting forest fires or returning each other's grazing cattle which accidentally cross the border.
- The governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, in cooperation with the OSCE Monitoring Mission and possibly other mechanisms, should agree to jointly investigate incidents which involve the targeting of civilians and their property.
- The governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan may benefit from an internal process of reconsidering the possible value and benefits of CBMs. The specific context of the international Armenia-Azerbaijan border may offer opportunities to pilot certain kinds of measures and initiative with no loss of strategic military advantage.

2.

The EU can and should play a more active role in promoting the practical benefits of CBMs for conflict-affected people, as part of its support for the OSCE Minsk Group, and challenge more the use of militant rhetoric.

The EU as a body with both economic resources, wide and relevant experience among its member states, and an interest in supporting political settlement, is well placed to make the case, in practical terms, for what CBMs can offer. The EU has been an important donor supporting a number of conflict resolution and confidence-building projects. Participants' views on both sides of the conflict divide suggest that the EU could do more in a situation where a final political settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains elusive.

"We doubt that the EU is ready to help us."

Karabakh Armenian resident, Mardakert, January 2012

In spite of the stated goals in its partnership documents with Azerbaijan and Armenia prioritising conflict resolution, the EU has so far maintained a low-profile role more broadly in NK conflict resolution efforts. Baku, in particular, has been lukewarm on the idea of direct EU involvement in CBM projects on the ground in NK, fearing that its direct involvement may strengthen and legitimise the territory's authorities. As a result, there is still no consensus either within the EU or between its partners – Armenia and Azerbaijan – about what role it might best play by its direct involvement at the present stage. Some local respondents harked back to the basic trade and barter contacts Azerbaijanis and Armenians had before the 1991–94 war.

"We used to have regular trade contacts with Azerbaijanis. We mostly bought fruits from them and sold them our cheese, ghee and other products ... We used to sell them 80 percent of our meat products."

Armenian resident, Kirants village (Tavush region), January 2012



Two boys sitting on the top of the minaret of a destroyed mosque, Shusha/i, Nagorno Karabakh.
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The consultations in the study point to the idea of having joint internationally-supported investigations into incidents that have specifically involved civilian casualties and damage to their property. This deserves particular attention and could be one of the most realistic and promising CBMs in the immediate term. This is a particular initiative in which the EU, in full support of and in coordination with the OSCE, and specifically through the mechanism of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) with an adjusted mandate, could have an important role. It is also something that could be started independently of specific progress in political talks and military confidence-building measures. Another key area that requires a more proactive approach now is that of tackling and challenging the use of militant rhetoric and hate narrative; and encouraging also a more participatory approach in the peace process, drawing in stakeholders at different levels of society.

"How can we stay in contact with Azerbaijanis, if we see on TV that they are filled with hostility?"

Armenian resident, Voskepar village, Tavush region

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The OSCE should extend the mandate of its Monitoring Mission, and the work of the EUSR could usefully include closer engagement with the conflict-affected populations in border areas, including regular visits and facilitating joint investigations of the incidents involving civilians and their property.
- International actors at multiple levels should actively discourage the use of militant rhetoric, demonstrating the damaging impact this has on specific policy fields of mutual interest, as well as the wider rhetorical climate.
- The international community, and EU specifically, is recommended to find ways to provide assistance in relevant human rights and development domains irrespective of the legal status of territory, for example in the fields of child rights, gender and the freedom of expression.
- Explore what could be done in the border context on socio-economic assistance and also on cross-border initiatives.

3.

Local people living near the Line of Contact require special attention from both government and international donors, as they face a double vulnerability, related to both security and livelihoods.

People living near the LOC are particularly vulnerable to any escalation of the conflict, regular shooting incidents and landmines. The unresolved conflict not only poses a lethal threat, but also undermines the livelihoods of the population in these impoverished conflict-affected areas. Since most of the pasturelands of the frontline villages are held by the other side, the scarcity of land forces shepherds to take risks in grazing their cattle in areas close to minefields and in dangerous proximity to Armenian positions. On the one hand, the Azerbaijani Government has focused on responding to the livelihood needs of people living in these areas by rebuilding social infrastructure, such as providing uninterrupted access to electricity, natural gas, drilling new artesian wells and building new roads. However, a chronic lack of transparency, public oversight and consultation mechanisms reduces the effectiveness of the state-provided assistance policies. Research in Azerbaijani frontline villages indicates that the Government does not appear to have an evacuation plan in the event of large-scale hostilities. That prompts a concern about duty of care issues and suggests that, in the absence of adequate security guarantees, the Azerbaijani Government should refrain from resettling more IDPs in proximity to the LOC.

"Sometimes when the intensity of the shootings declines, people start working during the daytime and then they start shooting again. This is how I myself got wounded."

Azeri resident, Gapanly village (Tartar district), January 2012

One of the findings that emerges from the interviews in the different contexts is that those settled near the Line of Contact around NK are indeed more concerned about their safety than either their Azerbaijani compatriots living in the border areas (Tovuz and Gazakh districts)

or, in fact, than Armenians living in Tavush region. Unlike the NK context, on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border both sides have substantial civilian settlements and, therefore, they usually avoid escalating the situation in order not to put their own civilians at greater risk. That said, because of the shootings and the mine hazard, people living in the border districts cannot use substantial parts of their farmlands and pastures. There are virtually no employment and income-generating opportunities. Small-scale subsistence farming is the only means of earning one's living and this opportunity is also undermined by the impact of the unresolved conflict and relatively poor social infrastructure available.

"We have houses in the exposed areas. But we do not have a serious concern for our security... They [Armenians] do not shoot [at the village], because they also have villages and land plots close to our positions. So, in a way, we are acting by the principle 'you do not touch me, and I do not touch you'."

Group discussion with Azeri participants, Kemerli village (Gazakh district), January 2012

Local populations near the LOC face two different though interconnected orders of problem; a difficult socio-economic context plus a conflict situation. The distinct implications of each problem, and how they interact, need to be unpacked. For many in rural areas it comes down to the basic issue of what access they can get to pastureland to graze their cattle. An Armenian view expressed is that the resolution of the NK conflict is a necessary yet insufficient condition for resolving salient socio-economic problems in the frontier areas. Yet in a chicken and egg situation, appropriate conditions for addressing socio-economic issues cannot be imagined without the resolution of the conflict first. 'All such

issues must be resolved simultaneously' is a view which conveniently feeds the argument of proponents of a 'package' solution; and underlines the complexity and contentious nature of the challenges and of dealing with them.

"At present, servicemen forbid us to graze our cattle on lands (closer to the border), but these are our main pastures. Consequently, our cattle population has fallen sharply; that is quite awful as people here live by keeping cattle; in fact, we all live by our land. Given lack of agricultural land, many people left the village."

Armenian resident, Dovegh village (Tavush region), January 2012

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Azerbaijani Government should engage in wider and regular consultations with the affected populations on its side of the LOC to ensure that its existing assistance strategies are not mismanaged and are effectively implemented to meet local needs. In particular, this relates to the distribution of targeted social assistance, rebuilding the social infrastructure and improving access of these communities to potable and irrigation water. This should be done by the Armenian Government and NK authorities as well.
- Practical cooperation is recommended, with international support, around missing persons and facilitating ways to achieve cooperation when remains are found in the frontline areas; this is a clear opportunity for confidence-building with no loss of tactical advantage.
- The EU should encourage governing authorities to focus specifically on the issue of sniper deployment and to accept the mediators' proposal to withdraw snipers to a distance of 500 meters from the border.
- Governing authorities in control of different patches of territory are recommended to coordinate landmine clearance.

4.

Improving governance, including in the security, justice and economic sectors, is essential for peaceful and normalised development in the region.

Reports from both sides of the conflict divide note numerous 'governance' or 'state-building' deficiencies to do with an obsolete production system in a new economic context, an inefficient and top-down system of resource distribution, corruption and resulting socio-economic problems that is independent of, though exacerbated by, the conflict. Official policies have often been mismanaged, because they were implemented with little transparency, oversight and consultation with intended direct beneficiaries. Lack of irrigation water was mentioned as a major problem in every village visited.

"They conducted a fake official opening of the irrigation pipeline two years ago, but the fact is the pump does not work. They spent three for the work and put ten in their pockets... The new road was poorly built. Look, it already has cracks in the surface and the traffic lines are rubbed out... We are thankful to the state for allocating money [for the construction of the road], but it is embezzled locally."

Azeri residents, Gaymagly village (Gazakh district), January 2012

Among common views expressed is the suggestion that the authorities should be more attentive towards local needs and seek to engage the population in frontline districts in regular consultations prior to taking decisions aimed at improving their safety and livelihoods. That way they could not only significantly increase the efficiency of their own assistance programmes, but would also help improve the self-reliance of the local communities.

"There is no organisation in the village to raise an issue on its behalf. And when someone raises an issue individually, they [the authorities] do not even respond."

Azeri residents, Kemerli village (Gazakh district), January 2012

CBMs – chicken or egg?

Conflict parties together with international stakeholders can and should agree to take up joint CBMs to reduce the conflict's impact on the civilian population and their property. Such measures need not wait for progress at the peace talks or the strengthening of the cease-fire regime.

The findings from this preliminary research point to the fact that insecurity is experienced in different ways on each side of the conflict divide. Azeris, settled compactly right up to the LOC, experience insecurity as part of the personal danger associated with everyday life on a frontline. Armenians living in NK (generally not in frontline areas) feel a general sense of insecurity living in an unrecognised entity with little prospect of gaining recognition. Given the differing perceptions of insecurity, it is unclear whether measures to build confidence in one context would necessarily work in the other, for example, adapting successful pilot CBMs conducted on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border for implementation in the areas near the LOC around NK. Certainly the Armenian research for this study does not present a convincing case to suggest this and further research into local views is merited. Yet it is clear that a way needs to be found to advocate CBMs as a means to alleviate these different experiences of insecurity, promote the interests of and improve the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people in these conflict affected areas, while avoiding criticisms of 'false symmetry', i.e. portraying Armenian and Azerbaijani interests as more compatible and similar than they actually are.

One possible benefit from well-tailored CBMs that could be promoted through international efforts would precisely be a local governance dividend, including in the area of practical human rights, that it is hoped would have wider resonance. For now, the situation of 'no war, no peace' remains stuck in dispiriting gridlock. But the merits of practical CBMs need to be promoted even more effectively as they offer an important way forward.

"We do not feel safe in the village for as long as we know that peace is not established, and we live on the frontier. Whether they shoot or not, at present we have only a cease-fire. Hence, it would be wrong to say that we are very safe. We will be safe when peace is established."

Armenian resident, Dovegh village (Tavush region), January 2012

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Local authorities should provide more effective solutions to community social and economic problems (schools, recreation centres, libraries, sports schools).
- The EU and other international actors are recommended to find ways to provide assistance in the sphere of human rights and development irrespective of the legal status of territory.
- A recommendation cited locally in NK, and addressed to local political authorities, calls for work to be intensified to attract support in key governance domains (such as the judiciary) from international donors.
- International actors and primarily the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan should explore and define ways in which the population living in NK today, and those who were displaced from it as a result of conflict could be more involved and engaged in peace talks and decision-making directly affecting them.



Cover photo shows a group of shepherds from the village of Agdam in Tovuz district grazing their cattle on the border with Armenia, January 2012. Shepherds are among the most vulnerable population groups in the frontline villages.

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This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Conciliation Resources and Saferworld take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.



Two Armenian girls from a family displaced by conflict. Originally from Baku, the family now live in Shusha/i in Nagorno Karabakh.

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References and Acknowledgements

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Methodology

The perspectives and ideas in this policy brief and accompanying report are drawn from a series of individual and group interviews held in the first two months of 2012 in a range of locations: on the Azerbaijani side, in six villages close to the LOC in Agdam, Fizuli, Tartar and Goranboy districts in January 2012; and in seven villages in Tovuz and Gazakh districts, close to the international border with Armenia. On the Armenian side, consultations were held in ten villages in Tavush region (marz) in January; and in six communities in Karabakh, including four villages and two towns, which were visited in January and February 2012. The people the researchers spoke to were representative in terms of age, gender and social group. Given the constraints of resource and time, this partly drew on some established contacts with local researchers in the region.

The policy brief reflects the perspectives of local people from either side of the divide and inevitably reflects starkly divergent viewpoints which need to be considered. In the research the differences in these perspectives are clear and not least in the use of place names identified in the brief. Qualitative methods of social research were used for the study in order to fit in with a participatory approach; and the methodology sought to gather voices from the local areas which were summarised and analysed by the authors. Altogether, around 280 people were interviewed in the component studies.

The accompanying report, *Putting people first: Reducing frontline tensions in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh*, looks at the mix of challenges and possible opportunities in the region, and specifically how these are seen from local perspectives.