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Towards a secure future

**Community voices in border areas of
Armenia and Azerbaijan**

January 2015



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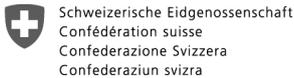
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This report is based on contributions by Togrul Juvarli (independent consultant) and Maya Barkhudaryan (Civil Society Institute), setting out Azerbaijani and Armenian perspectives on the situation in border areas along the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It draws from participatory research carried out by Society for Humanitarian Research (Baku) and Civil Society Institute (Yerevan), with methodological support from Saferworld. The report was edited by Hans Gutbrot. Tabib Huseynov and Nana Gamkrelidze of Saferworld also provided comments and input.

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Overview

EVEN THOUGH A FORMAL CEASEFIRE was reached between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 1994, the conflict remains unresolved. Tens of thousands of hostile troops remain dug behind formidable defensive fortifications along the Line of Contact around Nagorny Karabakh (NK) and the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Exchanges of gunfire and active sniping continue to take place almost daily along the front lines. Absence of full-scale hostilities and a frozen peace process has kept the NK conflict in the periphery of international attention. But those closely watching the conflict seem to agree that the settlement should be treated as a priority, given that the status quo may be increasingly unstable and difficult to sustain.

2014 has reportedly seen the worst instances of military escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in two decades, with reported casualties the highest recorded since the 1994 ceasefire agreement. The tit-for-tat military clashes that took place in July–August 2014 along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border, as well as the shooting down of an Armenian military helicopter over the Line of Contact in November, have been unprecedented in their scale and character. Such incidents risk escalating the situation beyond control.

The escalation of conflict and daily front line skirmishes pose particular challenges to the civilian population living close by. Armenia and Azerbaijan have substantial civilian populations living in the immediate proximity of their mutual border, which has been turned into a heavily militarised front line. Azerbaijan also has a substantial civilian population living near the Line of Contact around NK. These front line communities suffer the consequences of the lasting conflict like no other group. They are particularly exposed to any escalation of the conflict, regular shooting incidents, and landmines. Absence of proper international oversight has created a dangerous environment whereby civilians and their properties have been repeatedly targeted by the opposing military forces. Apart from usually episodic media reports covering only serious incidents involving casualties, there has been no systematic open record of incidents targeting civilians and their property.

At the same time, the unresolved conflict not only poses a lethal threat but also undermines the livelihoods of the population in these impoverished conflict-affected areas. Because of the shootings and the mine hazards faced, people living in these areas cannot use substantial parts of their farmlands and pastures. There are virtually no employment or income generating opportunities. Small-scale subsistence farming is the only means of earning one's living and this opportunity is also undermined by the unresolved conflict and poor social infrastructure.

Policy oriented research and discussions in Armenia, Azerbaijan and beyond have rarely focused on local community perceptions or the scope for small, practical steps

that can help to improve the security and livelihoods of the civilian population living in direct proximity to the front line. Thus, the present study aims to contribute to the awareness, both within the region and abroad, of the security concerns of communities living in front line areas along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and propose local community suggestions on how to improve their own situation.

The study consists of two analyses – from both the Armenian and the Azerbaijani sides – and looks at what can be done to improve the security of border communities living on either side of the Armenia-Azerbaijan international border. It was prepared within the framework of the project ‘Promoting community-focused responses to insecurity and conflict in border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan’, implemented by Saferworld, the Civil Society Institute (Yerevan) and Society for Humanitarian Research (Baku) and financially supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. At the time of the research, the project covered only the border areas between Armenia and Azerbaijan, so the present study does not cover the Line of Contact context, where Azerbaijan has a substantial number of civilians living in direct proximity to the front line. The project implementers hope to expand the project to the communities living around the Line of Contact in the near future.

The perspectives and ideas in this policy brief are drawn from a series of individual and group interviews held in October–December 2014 in a number of locations close to the international border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Azerbaijan, these comprised ten vulnerable rural communities in the Gazakh, Tovuz and Agstafa districts. In Armenia, research focused on nine communities in the Tavush region. In both countries, researchers spoke to a broad representation of households using similar methodology and focusing on local assessments of three major topics: (1) impact of the conflict on everyday life of the communities; (2) how these impacts are currently being managed by various governmental, non-governmental and international institutions; and (3) how the management of impacts can be improved.

We hope this study will be useful for policy makers, civil society organisations, and international practitioners working on this conflict, and that it will help raise awareness of the security and livelihood needs of the civilians living in either side of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

1

Another step towards security:

Analysis of the problems of Azerbaijani communities bordering Armenia

By **Togrul Juvarli**

1. Introduction

AZERBAIJANI COMMUNITIES LIVING AT THE BORDER WITH ARMENIA bear the brunt of any escalation of tensions with Armenia. They suffer the immediate consequences of conflict, as again became clear in the summer of 2014.

This study looks at what can be done to improve the security of border communities. The communities play a key role in improving their own situation, and this project was specifically designed to engage them. Ensuring security of the border communities must be based on mutual cooperation between the government and the communities themselves, at least in the form of constant exchange of information, so as to mobilise the necessary – and mostly available – resources.

The research was carried out by the Society of Humanitarian Research (SHR) of Azerbaijan between October–December 2014 in the framework of the project ‘Promoting community-focused responses to insecurity and conflict in border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan’ it jointly carried out with Saferworld. Its main objective was to identify and analyse the factors that affect the security and livelihoods of the Azerbaijani communities living near the border with Armenia.

The data for the research was collected through consultations with local experts, as well as in focus group discussions and interviews with local residents in the ten most vulnerable communities along the Azerbaijani–Armenian border in the Kazakh, Agstafa and Tovuz districts.

SHR selected these ten communities from an initial sample of 15 villages. The study focused on the ten most vulnerable rural communities that could be accessed, to produce an in-depth analysis of the current situation. The focus groups included 97 representatives from a broad cross-section of the local population, with participants typically representing household heads.¹ In addition, a number of conversations were

¹ Of 97 participants, 12 were female, as households are still primarily led by males. A particular focus on gender was beyond the scope of this study, but may be worth following up on.

conducted with randomly selected village inhabitants. Throughout, discussions were designed to facilitate a free exchange of ideas and opinions.

The fieldwork was carried out throughout 2014. Some of the communities had already been studied by Saferworld in 2012, providing additional context.²

Following the research, project staff also offered practical assistance to the participants of the discussion groups. On several of the issues participants and the team tried either to find solutions or, where applicable, to provide recommendations on sources of external support. Relevant topics included how to improve security, maintain and improve livelihoods, and also how to support communities to organise.

Based on this close relationship with the communities, this report offers recommendations on how to respond to the needs and interests of ordinary people living in the conflict zone. It also looks into how various security providers, including governmental agencies, international organisations, and donors, can contribute to security and help ensure normal living conditions for the affected communities.

The report is structured in the following parts: (1) the impact of the conflict on everyday life of the communities; (2) measures taken by the government and non-governmental organisations to address the problems of these communities; and (3) community-informed problem-solving strategies. The conclusion summarises the analysis of the focus group discussions and interviews, and also provides recommendations by local experts.

2. Impact of the conflict on the everyday life of the communities

Although many residents of the border communities over the years have got used to being at risk every day, the communities highlighted that last year provided a major jolt. As they saw it, 2014 saw a drastic deterioration of the front line situation, forcing residents of the border communities to rethink their assumptions and priorities.

With this new escalation, the communities faced a vastly enhanced worry about their security. Residents cited security as the issue that is foremost on their minds. This added to the struggle they already faced in securing their livelihoods, in a difficult environment. In terms of how threatened they feel, the border communities at the Azerbaijani-Armenian border now have become more like the villages neighbouring Nagorny Karabakh.

The actual security of the villages depends largely on their geographic location. Residents of the village of Agdam, in the Tovuz district, say that their problem is that Armenian forces hold several strategic areas overlooking the village. In many other communities the situation is similar. People in the small village of Gushchu Airym, in the district of Kazakh, highlight that effectively they are blockaded as they are exposed to enemy fire from different directions. Local residents say that they cannot live a normal life, knowing that they are constantly in the crosshairs of the enemy.

The length of the border with Armenia causes additional problems for some communities. For instance, the village of Alibeyli in the Tovuz district shares a 17km border with four large villages of the Berd district of Armenia. Alibeyli, the village that is closest to the front line in the Tovuz district, is home to some 650 households, or about 4,000 residents. It is one of the most vulnerable villages of the region. Similarly, some other villages, including Gushchu Airym in the Kazakh district, are cut off during fierce exchanges of fire as all local roads are targeted.

Escalating tensions hit communities that had previously enjoyed relative calm. Kemerli, for instance, was hit in the summer of 2014, after 15 years of relative tranquillity.

² See, "Putting People First: Reducing frontline tensions in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nagorny Karabakh", Saferworld, April 2012; and a shorter briefing, "Nagorny Karabakh conflict and frontline areas", Saferworld, May 2012; www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/653

This brought back memories of the Karabakh war when Kemerli came regularly under fire and it frequently featured in military and media reports. Back then, local residents had actively defended their village together with the army. (Previously, as residents recall, the first clashes with Armenians from neighbouring villages had taken place as early as in 1984.)

Some communities saw the first signs of the looming escalation already at the beginning of the year. According to eyewitnesses (and empirical data), the village of Agdam, with a total population of 1,250 inhabitants, has been the target of increasingly intense gunfire by Armenian forces since the beginning of 2014. Rumours as well as radio and TV reports about intensified shooting towards local villages have increased the fears of Agdam residents. The focus group participants mentioned that Agdam at one point sustained five days of almost constant gunfire. Local residents spent much of that time in the shelter and were afraid to stay at home at night as the bombardment was especially severe just after sunset.

The focus group discussions showed that residents of different villages rank security threats differently, though most of them highlighted the same dangers as in previous years: Armenian snipers, destruction of homes by heavy gunfire, targeting of farmland during farming work, and landmines.

Targeting of villages: a game without rules

One person familiar with the situation said that in a way locals have to play a game without rules, every day: communities try to predict as accurately as possible, what will happen the next day. Yet as people in the focus groups say, despite the duration of the conflict, it remains unpredictable.

The focus group discussions and interviews show that local residents are tired of being constantly afraid and worried about their safety. One of the local residents, a 57-year-old school teacher from Alibeyli, explains what people feel about the constant targeting of their homes: *“Not a single house is left intact near the Armenian positions. Roofs, windows – everything is hit by the Armenian fire. Power lines are often damaged, causing outages that may last for days. Sometimes the village is simply impossible to reach. It’s just like a real war...”*

People who live in the houses that face enemy positions suffer most. A school teacher from the Tovuz district: *“Most of our homes have facades that face the Armenian positions because we always used to build houses with windows towards the sun. That is why during the nightly exchanges of gunfire we always turn the lights off. In recent times we have been forced to brick the windows up.”*

In recent years people have built protective stonewalls to shield buildings, especially schools and kindergartens. One such wall has been under construction around the school of Agdam since August. Although the creation of bomb shelters is not suggested directly yet, it may become an option as people seek refuge in the basements of their houses during intense gunfire.

Gunfire focuses on the main access roads and thereby threatens most movement. In one of the most vulnerable villages, Gushchu Airym, the main road is almost permanently under fire. Local residents regularly get caught on their way from or to the village. When coming back, they have to try to get home through surrounding forests or spend the night out, taking shelter behind the walls of houses at the entrance to the village. In one of the focus groups, several participants recalled how they stood one summer night this year with their backs pressed to the wall, from 10 p.m. until 5 a.m., full of fear, and worrying about the fate of the families they had left at home. Throughout they phoned their families, trying to calm them and instructing them where and how to hide.

One of the local residents, a pensioner, described his experience of such a day: *“I was on my way home together with my daughter-in-law and grandson. We were returning from my niece’s wedding in a neighbouring village. It was late evening and once we passed the village of Farahli the shooting began. Actually we got stuck, unable either to get back or move forward, and we spent six hours hiding right at the entrance to the village. It was only after the shooting ended that we were able to get home. I think that the government could help by digging a deep trench, a sort of a makeshift ravine, to hide the 200 metre-section of the road closest to the village. It could shield us from the bullets.”*

On the outskirts of Gushchu Airym, in a part of the village known as Mazam, a 100-metre section of the road is fully exposed to Armenian bullets and snipers. Moving down the road, both on foot or by car, is extremely risky and stressful. Here, too, local residents have proposed constructing a stonewall to protect this section of the road from gunfire. It may be challenging, though, to build a wall of that length, especially when under fire from Armenian forces.

These two cases illustrate a key security concern. People in border communities all emphasised just how important it is for them to travel safely within and between their communities. The focus group participants also underlined that it was important to keep the roads in normal conditions. *“If the local roads were not as bad, we would feel more secure during the shooting incidents. These roads are not good for cars that have their lights on. How can we bring an injured or sick man to the administrative centre for emergency treatment by such roads?”* a resident of the village of Farahli, Kazakh district, complained.

This concern was also echoed by those who work outside their home villages. They, too, have to minimise their risk on a daily basis. One of the respondents, a 35-year-old resident of the village of Jafarli, Kazakh district, commented: *“Every day I drive to Kazakh to my work. Sometimes I return from work late at night. But after sunset the road can be hit by Armenians at any moment. Driving with headlights on at that time is simple suicide. There is no other way but to drive in complete darkness. If the road was good we would get home faster and face less danger.”*

In the village of Farahli local residents complained that only one of the three local roads was in a reasonable condition, and even that road was within the range of Armenian snipers. That is why, in the words of the local residents, it is important to repair alternative secure roads. Also, there are no traffic signs at some sections of the Kazakh-Farahli road. This means that people not familiar with the territory may easily lose their way and accidentally come close to Armenian positions.

Shooting incidents can interrupt all of life, even within relatively safe homes. Residents of Alibeyli describe that the street lights are often turned off because of the shootings and the whole village plunges into a darkness that seems particularly ominous. In other cases, when shooting lasts longer, authorities switch off the electricity to make local homes less visible to targeted enemy fire. Moreover, authorities also stop the central gas supply during intense gunfire, to prevent accidental explosions.

Although some villages can be caught in crossfire from both sides of the border because of their location, residents agree that in most cases they believe that peaceful villages are being targeted deliberately.

Shooting of civilians

Local residents say that it is hard for them to see what military reasons, if any, can justify the shooting of civilians by the militaries. They find it more or less understandable when the opposing militaries fire at each other’s positions. But they can’t see why innocent civilians are treated as enemy combatants. As one person put it, *“What is going on at the border can be described as a hunting party for people”*.

The focus group participants in the village of Kemerli recalled how a group of local residents went swimming and fishing to a nearby lake, early in the summer of 2014. All of sudden Armenian troops fired a barrage of bullets at them with Kalashnikov assault rifles. Villagers described it as a miracle that nobody was hurt. As described above, Kemerli had previously not seen ceasefire violations for 15 years. Yet after the ambush local residents have avoided all the territories exposed to Armenian positions. Later, in August, their village indeed came under repeated heavy fire.

One of the Kemerli residents describes how constrained their life is, because of the fear of being targeted: *“My relative was hit in the leg by an Armenian bullet this August. People in local villages are scared by the prospect of being shot and we have no access to the best pasture and arable lands. If someone’s wandering cattle accidentally reach such places, there is no way to get them back – one can be easily shot and killed there”*.

People are especially upset at how senseless the shooting seems to them: *“Recently the Armenians targeted a 77-year-old woman and her two grandchildren. They were wounded in the leg and fortunately escaped being killed. In July, the village sustained six hours of constant shooting. A 17-year-old boy and a 57-year-old woman were injured – they were visiting their relatives in our village. The government should act more decisively to repel such Armenian attacks. When the village comes under fire we have to stay indoors for hours”*, a former serviceman from the village of Alibeyli said.

In the tense days of August there were intense exchanges of fire along almost the entire border. Residents say that it was hard to figure out at the time whether people were caught in crossfire or deliberately targeted by snipers. Kamran Imran-ogly Tagiev, a senior school student (10th Form), was wounded in the hand and leg in the village of Kohne-Gyshlag, Agstafa district, on 8 August. Kamran, the only child in the family, is currently being treated at home, as doctors told his parents that his wounds were not life-threatening and he would soon recover.

Another child, 9-year-old Goshgar Teymur-oglu Abbasov, was hit in the neck by shrapnel in his village, while 44-year-old Chingiz Aslanov, a father of two, was badly injured in the hip and admitted to the central diagnostic centre of the Kazakh district. Although in some cases wounds can be caused by stray bullets, local residents are convinced that they are targeted deliberately.

Funerals, too, are dangerous as many local cemeteries are located in no-man’s land. They are thus exposed to gunfire. In addition, access roads to the cemeteries are often heavily mined. Residents say that the prospect of being killed or injured by a landmine while burying the dead is particularly dreadful. Some cemeteries are virtually impossible to reach as they are situated on hilltops, in the crosshairs of the enemy forces. In some villages, for instance in Agdam, the nominal border cuts through the local cemetery, dividing it into two parts.

Landmines

Almost the entire territory adjacent to the Azerbaijani-Armenian border is heavily mined, adding additional risk to the lives of local residents. In the village of Gushchu Airym landmines blocked access to the local spring, the only source of fresh water for the community. The people requested assistance from the army and the area was finally cleared of mines by the sappers who were more or less familiar with the terrain.

Another case was reported by a resident of Jafarli, also a former serviceman: *“A shepherd from our village was wounded by a landmine explosion several months ago. The pasture where he used to graze his cattle was close to military positions. The day was misty and he lost his way and accidentally strayed right into a minefield. Four hours after being hit by a landmine he managed to phone his friend and told him what happened. With the help of the military we evacuated him from the minefield but were unable to give him emergency treatment in the village, as there are no medical facilities specialised on such kind of medical aid.”*

In Alibeyli, a focus group discussion recalled a 2011 event that had left a very deep impression. As villagers tell it, Aygun Shahmaliyeva, 13, found a doll on the bank of the Tovuz River and brought it home, unaware that it was actually a toy mine full of explosives. The doll exploded, killing the girl and badly wounding her mother. The whole community was shocked by this apparently deliberate targeting of children.

How to keep children safe

Residents believe that children clearly are the most vulnerable and unprotected members of the border communities. Parents are deeply concerned about the hardship and danger that their children are exposed to. In one village, focus group participants told the story of a local family discovering multiple holes from bullets in the blanket that their young child had been sleeping in, after some late night shooting. The boy was unhurt but to the participants of the focus group this frightening near-miss illustrated the worry fear that parents experience.

Although local residents are determined to stay in their homes whatever happens, they also say that living conditions are getting worse. Frequent fierce exchanges of gunfire sometimes force residents to evacuate their children, bringing them to the safety of the bigger towns away from the front. But evacuation itself can be dangerous as many of the roads come under fire, too.

A woman, a pensioner, from Jafarli, summed up the situation in the following words: *“At times they shoot at our village for five to six hours without a break. We, the adults, have got used to such things but it is hard for the children to stay indoors. I keep a close eye on my grandchildren to make sure that they do not slip out of the house. Every time they go to school we feel nervous and afraid. Sometimes I think that it’s not a good place for the youth to live. But leaving is not an option – it’s their home, their property.”*

As mentioned above, many local villages are building protection stonewalls around schools and kindergartens, and around houses that are close to Armenian positions. Although the walls cannot protect from artillery fire, they can shield the children from rifles and machine guns. At the government’s request, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provides assistance for such security measures.

Residents say that an increasing number of children suffer from neuroses. For that reason, too, local community leaders have repeatedly requested that a child psychologist be assigned to every village. They hope for assistance from international organisations and the government as the local communities do not have sufficient resources to pay for psychological support. The creation of a Safe Playground, sponsored by ICRC, in the village of Kemerli in 2005 was highlighted as an example of a great measure and characterised as a “big present for the local children”.

Social consequences of the conflict: partial breakdown of local economy

The ongoing security concerns add to the social and economic problems of the border communities. Conversely, poverty and social exclusion exacerbate people’s sense of insecurity. According to some focus group participants, government should proactively deal with the social and economic problems of the local residents, rather than just reacting. As they see it, the authorities often turn their attention to the problems of local communities only after media reports about shootings and new damage to villages.

In all communities covered by the study local residents identified similar economic problems. Among the most prominent of the shared challenges are that peasants are targeted during farming work, making it hard to farm and thus reducing income; water springs need to be restored, many water supply reservoirs are out of order, local irrigation networks get water from lakes situated on the Armenian territory and Armenians often cut off the water supply; also, the communities lack equipment and machinery.

Bad roads, already mentioned above, add to the sense of insecurity, since in emergency situations some villages can be neither reached nor evacuated. The danger of isolation has a detrimental effect on local economy.

There are few opportunities for normal work. Local residents say that they are hard-working people, willing to farm their lands day and night, but farming has become increasingly dangerous, if not impossible, as the local farmland is almost incessantly under fire. What used to be an advantage in Soviet times – common pasture and roads, shared irrigation and water supply networks, direct roads sometimes built prominently into the landscape – has become a constant headache for local residents.

According to one of the respondents, a school teacher from Agdam, Tovuz district, *“A couple of years ago constant gunfire by Armenian forces burnt all pasture around the village cemetery. Since then people have lost interest and motivation to farm. Nobody farms crops here today for fear that the harvest will be destroyed by the Armenians. Fertile lands are abundant in the village but all of them are near the Armenian positions. So we are actually unable to use our lands.”*

Residents feel that their districts are now gradually losing what used to be their economic strength in the past. In recent years, for instance, potato production has steadily declined in the Tovuz district, previously a major producer of high quality potatoes in the country. Now, there are neither seeds and fertilisers, nor agricultural machinery, nor farming loans.

Water supply, both for irrigation and drinking, is one of the most serious problems. There is some help from the government and other organisations, but often that is not enough. For instance, a large irrigation channel was built in the past in the village of Jafarli. It ran through the whole village and supplied water to all local households from the Agstafa River. Yet a decade ago, Armenia blocked the channel and the village has been without irrigation water ever since. Many local orchards and crops withered as a result.

A focus group participant from Kemerli highlighted the lack of water with the following words: *“We all have families and do our best to provide for them. But some problems are beyond our power to solve. We have long suffered from the problem of water. We used to have good harvests and a lot of livestock in the past, and supplied many products to the main agricultural market of the district. But the farming has come to a standstill, as there is no water. People are powerless to do anything. The water shortage is gradually turning the local farmland into a scorched landscape”.*

A 71-year-old woman from Gushchu Airym, speaking on the same theme: *“Water is our biggest concern – there is no water to drink and wash. Oh, what a time! There is only one way to bring water to the homes – on the back of a mule. Look at every household here. They have no possessions except a couple of rugs and worn-out clothes. They live in dire poverty and are unable even to wash their clothes. What kind of life we live, what a time!”*

According to residents, Armenia has blocked the sources of water that previously supplied the border areas of Azerbaijan. A respondent from Kemerli, a lorry driver: *“There was a water reservoir in the upper part of our village earlier. To ensure a stable water supply, water was pumped to the reservoir simultaneously via several channels. That is why water was never a problem in the village in former times. Today what used to be a large reservoir has shrunk to a small lake. Besides, the Armenians have built several factories on the river bank on their side of the border. Sometimes the factories dump their waste into the river and water becomes green as a result. I witnessed how a group of local teenagers went swimming but got out of the river with green-coloured bodies.”* Local residents now are afraid to use water from the river, despite the water shortage. They fear that there is too much pollution in the river.

Local residents worry that farmers will have to give up crop and livestock farming. This would leave the communities in a dire situation, as there are few employment opportunities outside farming. Local residents have now repeatedly requested to build some small rural enterprises in the border areas to give them enough incomes to sustain their lives. They believe that Azersu (responsible for the maintenance of the water supply and sewage systems) and Azeroilservice (development/renovation of roads and highways) companies, both of which implement projects in these districts from time to time, could create new jobs in the area. In the words of local residents, no matter how much needs to be done, there are enough skilled and qualified workers in large villages.

Another suggestion is to recruit volunteers from among local young men, once they complete mandatory military service, to serve in the army units deployed around these villages. As a result, local residents say they would feel more secure, while the families of the men could benefit from additional incomes. Residents also said that the government could develop special state employment programmes and should also encourage the development of all kinds of businesses here, including small ones.

At the same time, small business owners say they face a tough time. The owner of a small grocery booth from Gushchu Airym complained that her problems were impossible to solve: *“There are no grocery shops in our village. Those who have a car usually go for shopping to the administrative centre, as prices are lower there. My booth caters for those who have neither a car nor money and they usually seek to buy on credit. But I cannot sell on credit, as I am low on stock and short of cash. I need to replenish my stock at the end of every month. And where should I get the money for that? I have already lost all hope of expanding my business and diversifying the stock – I have no chance to get a loan.”*

Other residents confirm that banks are reluctant to lend to small businesses in the conflict zone. They say that currently Finca is the only financial institution to provide small loans to local businesses. The national business development fund, the only financial structure of the country to offer low-interest (3%) loans, does not have any programmes in these areas.

The increasing destitution is leaving its mark in other ways. According to a respondent from Agdam, a handyman, most of the houses in the border villages have fallen into disrepair. Gunfire is not the only problem. As he describes it, local residents simply do not have the money to keep their houses in a reasonable shape.

Sometimes the laws and regulations are not helping. Residents say that under the current eligibility criteria the households that have cattle are ineligible for state social assistance. In the opinion of local residents, this regulation is unfair. As they describe it, even the poorest families in rural areas have at least one cow. In almost all villages the focus group participants insisted that the financial situation of local families should be adequately assessed and low-income families should get additional aid, for instance by reimbursing part of their utility bills.

Investments in infrastructure matter as they allow communities to connect with each other. Bad and dangerous roads and the lack of infrastructure often end up separating the communities. A river, for example, splits Jafarli into Boyuk Jafarli and Bala Jafarli. One local entrepreneur in Bala Jafarli explains: *“Our village stretches along a river. Floods and mudflows are common here. Earlier the two banks of the river were connected by a bridge built by voluntary donations from the local residents. But every seasonal flood destroys the bridge. So why doesn’t the government help us by building several sufficiently high suspension bridges over the river? We cannot do it by ourselves.”* Targeted investments can thus make a difference. As the focus group participants pointed out, it is crucial to their survival that there is unity and cohesion, and strong bonds within and between their communities.

3. Dealing with problems of border communities: Existing support resources

The central government's policy

How often does a community request assistance from local and regional governments? How does it make its request? Has it sought help from the central government? Has it ever tried to solve its problems by itself? These were key questions that were asked to community members to understand what they could do on their own, how they are doing it, and whether they are active enough.

Local communities are sensitive to any perceived sign of indifference to their problems. They keep a close eye on every visit to their village by local MPs or the district administration officials. They are grateful for any help from the government but, at the same time, never forget unfulfilled promises, interpreting them as an indication that their concerns are neglected.

Residents believe that the central government is well aware of the role of the border communities as a kind of first line of defence. They believe that the government monitors the situation closely and reacts promptly to help them. People in the affected communities mentioned, for instance, that the President ordered self-defence units to be formed in local villages, immediately after the conflict began to escalate in the summer of 2014. These units have not fully formed yet, but local residents have said that this measure will make them feel more secure. At least some residents seem keen on the idea. One former serviceman said: *"I have a military background and I cannot understand why I should hide at home. Enlist me in a patrol squad, give me arms and I will defend my village. We, the people who live here, know all Armenian positions in the vicinity better than anybody else."*

Residents of Agdam also expressed appreciation for the efforts of Ganira Pashayeva, a local MP, who made several trips to the village in 2014, even in dangerous days. According to residents, Pashayeva also ensured that her promises were kept by monitoring the activities of the local executive.

The focus group participants in Kemerli also said that the situation in their community had improved noticeably as a result of government action. They listed a number of projects they considered to be successful, including the renovation of a local school, the repair of a local administration building, the reconstruction of a local bridge, new water wells in the village, new water reservoirs, including two water pools for 40 local households, new water supply pipes, and a centralised winter heating system. Residents also highlighted the new 23km Yukhary Salahly-Kemerli road, and said that a 9km section of a local road was asphalted, while a 2km section of a road between Kemerli and other villages was paved with gravel stone.

Almost all leading governmental agencies are involved, to varying degree, in reconstruction projects in the villages damaged by shooting. Representatives of the transport ministry, Azersu, and mobile network operators are said to be visiting frequently.

The Agency for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Territories supplies building materials for locals to repair their damaged houses, though it does not help with construction. This can cause challenges due to the absence of more specialised craftsmen in some villages, or in households that lack people with construction skills.

Some of the most vulnerable villages were granted discounted prices for gas and electricity – the government pays half of their gas and electricity bills. However, most of the border communities point out that they have not enjoyed such kind of aid. (They also highlight that they are aware of similar discounts granted to border villages on the Armenian side.)

The communities and local administrations

The relations between local residents and local governments vary, depending on the community. In some villages residents openly express praise for the initiative of the local administration. In the village of Kemerli, for instance, local residents say that they are happy with how their administration handles their problems. In their words, local authorities did their best in recent years to improve their living conditions.

Yet in other villages the focus group participants noted with sarcasm that the most notable characteristic of their executive officials was their months-long absence. As they describe it, authorities usually arrive in their villages only after press reports about gunfire.

Overall, residents believe that they get enough support from the state through various government-funded programmes. They stress that the main factor of success is how these programmes are implemented locally, down at the village level. Provincial and municipal authorities are closer to the issues than ministries and governmental agencies in Baku. According to residents, local authorities should also focus on monitoring the quality and timely delivery of governmental programmes on the local level. Where necessary, local authorities should also adapt the government's projects to local circumstance, and supplement it with their own resources.

International organisations

Residents mentioned the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the ICRC as international organisations they are familiar with.

Residents say that ICRC provides significant assistance. In Gushchu Airym, for instance, it helped renovate the local water supply network and provided financial assistance – 1,100 Manats – for 11 low-income families to buy cattle. Other ICRC activities include projects to support local businesses, identify potential capabilities of local communities, and train local residents on how to stay safe during gunfire.

In one village local residents were highly critical of the OSCE monitoring mission, which has the mandate to monitor and report front line military incidents. From time to time the mission visits the target communities of this study, too. But local residents are frustrated and say they believe that the OSCE monitors have avoided visiting the villages that were hit by shooting incidents. They don't think that the OSCE is aware of their plight, and that consequently the international community lacks a full understanding of the situation.

The communities and non-governmental organisations

Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are based in the border-area districts. However, according to local residents, they have little impact and are barely visible. In the focus groups, the participants said that that NGO activists only pay short visits to the villages, typically in the run-up to elections. Residents said that NGOs could have the potential to provide significant support for local communities, for example by contributing to local-level community development projects, which require various kinds of specialised expertise.

As they receive little support from outside NGOs, several local communities have considered setting up their own. Those that have tried so far have not succeeded in obtaining official registration. The development of community NGOs is particularly important because the border communities do not hold local elections, as they are too exposed. Thus, they are not represented in the district-level municipalities and do not receive full municipal services. Therefore, they are particularly keen to organise themselves into community NGOs.

Overall, residents believe that the institutions and structures are in place to deal with their problems, as long as they have an opportunity to get active themselves. The central government initiates assistance programmes; the local administrations are

responsible for their promotion and implementation, while the civil sector can contribute to specific targeted projects. Regional experts, too, point out that the border communities are the central element of this scheme. To get their issues resolved, they must communicate clearly with all the other structures and organisations.

4. Capabilities and resources of the communities

The mood and level of initiative varies village by village, and also within them: *“In our village the government provides people with building materials to repair their damaged homes. But is there any point in repairing a house located within the firing range from Armenian positions? No sooner does the situation change than the gunfire will renew. It’s much more reasonable to protect these houses by stonewalls. Locals are not going to leave but they should not be left helpless against enemy fire”*, one of the focus group participants, a pensioner, from Alibeyli remarked.

Overall, the youth appeared more optimistic. A university student from Agdam, one of the most vulnerable communities put it this way: *“I’m a student at a university in Kazakh. By and large, I’m satisfied with the visible progress in the village – there is stable internet and phone communication, gas and power supplies, and so on. The main issue is that the local road is in a very bad shape and public service minivans do not run here at all.”*

There seems to be a high level of solidarity in the border communities, perhaps because people tend to unite in the face of common danger. Visitors to the area can observe how the community rallies to support any one member affected by an incident. People are aware that they could be the next to require support.

In one illustration of solidarity, local residents in Agdam worked to organise social assistance for one of their fellow villagers. After being discharged from military service the young man had returned home and then been badly injured by a landmine while farming. The man went insane as a result of his injuries, leaving the family with two children without a breadwinner. The focus group participants asked project staff for help in applying to obtain the official status of a war veteran for the young man. As his fellow villagers argue, the young man might as well have been wounded by a landmine during his army service.

In many large villages, practically all residents mobilise when one part of a village is hit by shooting or other conflict-related incidents have an impact. They come to help, or organise a collective response when more needs to be done. Yet villagers also say that their solidarity is tested daily by the many challenges each family faces, such as the overall sense of insecurity, unemployment, and the lack of communication with other villages.

Another problem is that these communities are particularly susceptible to fear and even panic. When Sarkis Ananian, an ethnic Armenian from the town of Noyemberyan, the Tavush province of Armenia, voluntarily crossed the border in August 2014, local residents were shocked and alarmed. To them, an Armenian easily trespassing onto the Azerbaijani territory and even walking freely around their village means that security measures in their district were not efficient enough to protect them. The residents feared that Armenian reconnaissance squads might follow Ananian’s path and infiltrate their region. These fears were largely caused by the lack of information as rumours feed on each other.

The communities emphasise that timely and accurate information is crucial for them. This is one lesson they draw from the 1992–1994 war. Yet only Armenian and Georgian TV channels are available in some areas, while mobile phone and internet communication often is cut by shooting when bullets damage the mobile base stations. The less information people get the more vulnerable they are to fear and panic.

Local residents think that it is very important to register all incidents in their villages, including detailed accounts of how many people were killed and wounded and what damage was done to private property. According to the focus group participants in Agdam, for instance, about 50 local houses have been damaged by gunfire since the beginning of the year. Similar estimates were presented by the focus group in the Kokha-Nabi village. In all villages the focus group participants listed many specific cases of people losing real or movable property. Their cattle, for example, cannot be kept behind locked doors. Cows need to graze, that is, they need to move around freely, especially in the spring. Sometimes they accidentally wander into minefields. Two cows that belonged to Sevil Huseynova from Alibeyli were badly injured by a landmine on 25 April. The locals did not succeed in pulling them out of the minefield.

Residents expressed an interest in more quantitative reporting of conflict-related incidents that result in deaths, injury or damage in their community. These reports would add to the existing qualitative assessments. Such quantitative reporting would specify the time and place of the incident, the name and birth date of the victim, or provide a detailed account and a photo of the damage to private property (houses, farms, livestock or other). This information could then be provided to governmental authorities but also to organisations such as the OSCE and the ICRC.

The focus group participants emphasised that local opinions should be taken into account by decision makers whenever they plan and then implement assistance programmes. A former engineer and currently a worker from Gushchu Airym: *“When a school was built in our village we all were very happy. There is a three-storey school in the village now. But if seen in the context of the population, this achievement does not look as exciting – does the village really need such a large school? Another example – a new road was constructed in the village, to our great delight. It appeared later, however, that the road was built over old water supply pipes. And now we are trying to detect the exact location of these pipes to restore water supply in the village. Surely, we are not supposed to dig up the newly asphalted road, are we? The government spends a lot of money on the village but unemployment remains high here and, on the whole, life is getting worse every day. This approach must be changed.”*

The focus group discussions demonstrated that local residents are not fully informed about which organisation or agency they should approach for each particular problem. They typically seek assistance from the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, being confident that it will react timely and effectively. But they appeared to know little about resources and capabilities of other governmental or non-governmental institutions, and international organisations.

One practical suggestion by experts is to set up a kind of information/organisational centre, a ‘project hub’, which can help to coordinate a community’s efforts and inform governmental agencies and NGOs about local problems. As these experts see it, such hubs could be an effective complement to local government. Local administrations are responsible for practical implementation of the government’s programmes, while the communities focus on local grassroots projects. Being well aware of its problems, a community and its leaders can communicate the community’s problems to decision makers, attempt to solve them on their own, provided they have enough resources, or propose potential problem-solving strategies and projects in cooperation with national NGOs. On the whole, such ‘structured communities’ can reduce the negative impact of the conflict and teach their members how to manage these processes.

Another advantage of an officially registered community organisation is that it can be empowered to raise funds for the problem-solving projects by itself, for instance from NGO coalitions or private donors. It could thus offer a fresh approach to help solve problems in the border communities, based on local initiative, formal and informal leadership, and a detailed understanding of the situation on the ground. It is also clear, however, that the introduction of such a concept requires substantial political and organisational support and also expertise, at least at the initial stage. Experts believe

that some pilots would be the best way to test it, and help communities learn about their own strengths.

5. Conclusions

It is already two decades since the ceasefire was declared in Nagorny Karabakh. Nevertheless, exchanges of gunfire are an almost daily occurrence both around Karabakh and along the Azerbaijani-Armenian border. For the residents of the border communities the war has never really ended. As one resident put it, living in his village is like living in wartime. A whole generation grew up without experiencing a lasting peace.

The border communities will only be fully secure once a lasting peace settlement is achieved in Nagorny Karabakh. Yet it is important to take every possible measure to reduce the risks and challenges these communities face even today. Otherwise the communities, especially the small ones, will feel abandoned. The constant flow of information – towards and from them – is an efficient tool against their marginalisation. Paying close attention to their problems and needs helps to reassure communities that they matter.

Apathy among local residents, however, is a serious challenge that needs to be addressed. One of the signs of this apathy is that some residents of these villages refuse to restore houses damaged by shooting, or to build new ones. Although the government is offering extensive assistance to rebuild houses and public facilities destroyed by gunfire, many residents think that there is no point in repairing the damaged property since it can be destroyed the very next day. Every new exchange of gunfire – something local communities have to live with – adds to this broader sense of futility. One positive aspect is that there is a high degree of solidarity within and between the communities. This is a resource that can potentially contribute to mobilisation.

As the research highlighted, the border communities remain vulnerable and insecure in a number of practical ways.

Many villages suffer from drinking water shortages, as local water supply systems are outdated and defunct. As a result, local residents are forced to take fresh water from a spring nearby, sometimes the only source of water for the entire community. In some instances, people have to queue several hours to get water. International financial organisations have made a lot of efforts in recent years to improve the water supply in different regions of the country. It seems, however, that the border communities need special infrastructure projects, which should take into account the local specifics, for instance the need to work under the constant risk of being shot.

In some small villages, locals were desperate for at least a small medical facility to be available there. People are often wounded by shrapnel or bullets during exchange of gunfire but it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to transport them to hospitals in the administrative centres and large villages, even if they need emergency treatment, as the roads usually are blocked by gunfire as well.

Although medical facilities are present in some border communities, they lack professional personnel, modern medical equipment and medications. Local residents have no knowledge of basic first aid. In one reported case, a resident of the village of Jafarli was wounded by a landmine. His leg was heavily bleeding but he had no idea how to stop the bleeding. He survived as fellow villagers came to his rescue. Every local resident in these areas should be trained in providing at least basic levels of first aid.

As public catering services and groceries are scarce in these areas, local residents have to make regular shopping trips to administrative centres. Owners of small shops have repeatedly tried to get bank loans to improve their stock and expand the business but to no effect. They say that banks are reluctant to lend to businesses in the conflict zone.

The lack of agricultural machinery is another problem. Some machinery and equipment is delivered to the villages from other places during seasonal farming work but they are not enough to farm all local lands. This reduces the motivation to farm crops, potatoes and vegetables. As mentioned above, the lack of machinery contributed to the decline of potato production in Tovuz in recent years, a district that was once widely recognised as a major producer of high quality potato in the country. Seeds and fertilisers are in short supply too. The lack of irrigation makes things worse, driving many local residents to give up farming and look for employment elsewhere. If the situation does not improve, hundreds of families in the border communities may be left without any means of subsistence.

New schools have been recently built in some villages. Although they are well-equipped and well-furnished, the absence of trained IT teachers prevents them from making the most of the PCs and other donated equipment. Besides, the school libraries do not have enough textbooks and other literature to ensure efficient education process.

Local children urgently need psychological care as they live in constant danger and suffer from the hardships of war. But such care is unavailable to them, either in the school or at home. There are no professional psychologists to provide support in the border communities. Moreover, there are no youth entertainment centres in the villages. Residents say that the lack of opportunities to socialise impairs the social skills of the local youth.

The problems described above represent only a part of the challenges the border communities face. The complete list is far bigger. Moreover, similar problems can be found in villages situated far from the conflict zone. But in these border-area districts the problems should be solved quicker and more effectively, because life is much harder here. Below are recommendations on how to address at least some of these problems.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this report can be divided into several groups, each covering a different aspect of life in the border communities. Some of these have already been proposed in previous years. There are additional recommendations, as the situation has evolved further.

Political conditions for security

Residents of the communities situated at the Azerbaijani-Armenian border should enjoy a special status, including discounted prices for public utility services, better access to bank loans, medical care, and other benefits. (One challenge would be to define clear eligibility criteria for this exceptional status for the border areas.)

Confidence-building measures should include practical arrangements that reflect the needs of the border communities. For instance, governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia could negotiate ceasefire agreements during the farming seasons, for funerals or other commemoration ceremonies in the villages.

The European Union and OSCE could expand the mandate of their missions and special representatives in the region to give them more powers to deal with the problems of border communities, including regular visits to the villages and joint investigation of incidents resulting in civilians' deaths and injuries and damage to their property.

Security measures

Instead of building stone walls to protect residents of the border communities from direct gunfire from Armenian positions, local experts believe it would be more useful to surround the villages by bulwarks made of earth to preserve the region's original landscape and make people less worried. Such small 'artificial hills' would replace stone walls as an efficient protection against gunfire. At the same time, they will not alter the local landscape too much. The bulwarks do not need stones which are not locally available, while earth and turf are abundant. Local residents can and should participate in the construction.

The government should help train professional medical workers among local residents to increase the efficiency of local medical facilities. In addition, medical professionals from other regions could be assigned to the border communities – to motivate them, the government should offer them higher salaries and bonuses. To this end, the border communities should be granted a special status, with higher salaries for local employees.

Local residents should be given training on how to detect and avoid landmines. Besides, there must be prominent and comprehensive landmine warning signs around the villages. The Azerbaijani National Agency for Mine Action should continue its operations in these areas.

First aid training is also essential for the border-area communities, as already mentioned above. Volunteers from among local residents should undergo training in basic first aid technique and receive first aid kits. The training must be carried out regularly, to ensure that the skills stay current.

Facilitation of community development

In order to facilitate community development, the border communities should be engaged in rural development projects implemented by international donor organisations, in cooperation with local NGOs.

Local and regional NGOs in the communities, capable of initiating and implementing community development projects, would make a great difference. Community NGOs that seek official registration should receive legal advice and assistance, and local and regional NGOs should receive assistance and financial support from international donors and a coalition of national NGOs. The assistance of local executive authorities could play a great role in helping such local communal NGOs to register and succeed.

Overall, there should be a reliable mechanism of communication and coordination between the communities and the government and international donors. Additionally, community leaders could play a stronger role in informing their communities about ongoing developments as they represent the major point of contact between communities and the external world. Additionally, regional structures could help to share and distribute information that is important to communities. In this context, a training course for local leaders may be useful.

Community development should involve neighbouring villages that are somewhat outside the front line zone. These neighbouring villages can provide shelter and other kinds of solidarity and support, and connect communities to a reality that is different from their own.

Social and economic development, employment

Focus groups discussions and expert interviews resulted in a number of suggestions that could be implemented to contribute to social and economic development:

The border communities of the Kazakh and Tovuz districts would benefit greatly if they could receive budgetary funds to repair local roads. These funds could come from the National Regional Development Program of Azerbaijan. The local governments and the communities themselves do not have sufficient resources for such infrastructure

projects. These villages can be also included into the National Program for the Development of Rural Roads.

Geological teams should work with local residents to explore the region for alternative sources of fresh water in the villages, and to assess available water resources. Practically every village needs new water wells, stand-by water reservoirs and artificial springs.

Getting a bank loan is a big problem for the residents of the border communities. Most of the houses in these villages are not legally privatised and, consequently, cannot be mortgaged. The Azerbaijani government should adopt special financial programmes to give the communities access to low-interest business and consumer loans, and provide financial assistance to local initiatives.

In some villages, opening new grocery shops would make it easier for local residents to obtain essential goods without having to travel.

Local residents should be engaged in various government-funded community development and infrastructure projects more actively. The local workforce could provide a major contribution to roadworks.

To reduce unemployment, a number of experts both in the region and in the capital suggested that a database of local professionals would be useful. They also suggest developing training/retraining courses for them, and employing them in various government-funded programmes. The same experts also suggested the idea of employment quotas for local residents to help them get jobs in district-level projects and local enterprises.

School students from the border communities could benefit from various student exchange programmes with other districts and regions of the country. This measure could relieve some of the psychological strain and stress for local students, and at the same time increase civil consciousness among the students, both local and those from other regions, provided these programmes are short-term and voluntary.

It would also be helpful to ease university admission rules for school graduates from the border communities and give them access to special scholarship programmes.

Youth entertainment centres should be set up in large villages.

2

The daily challenge of survival:

Border communities in Armenia

By **Maya Barkhudaryan**

1. Introduction

THIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED within the framework of the project ‘Promoting community-focused responses to insecurity and conflict in border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan’, implemented by Saferworld and the Civil Society Institute in Armenia, between October–December 2014. The research aimed to find out what factors affect the well-being of civilians in communities living near the border with Azerbaijan.

The research focused on security, economic and social challenges in and for the selected communities; how these challenges are addressed; and community suggestions on how to improve their own situation. The research also assessed how individuals and communities perceive their security in the context of military action along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

Although government officials visited all the villages this year, there still are few avenues for maintaining regular communication regarding economic and social challenges and their solutions. This report contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the communities. While there are common issues faced in all the villages, the report also addresses some of the differences, and highlights where villages have been particularly proactive in solving some of their challenges.

The research paper consists of three parts: (1) impacts of the conflict, (2) the ways the impacts are managed and (3) how the management of impacts can be improved. The conclusion gives concrete recommendations, based on the analysis of focus group discussions and interviews from local experts.

The information for the research was collected through interviews and focus group discussions in nine out of ten communities,³ desk analysis of print materials, and consultation with experts from the Tavush region and the Civil Society Institute programme implementation team. In total 83 people were interviewed and/or participated in discussions, of which 39 were women and 44 men, mainly of middle age (35–55-year-old). The focus groups and interviews were conducted in a free and friendly atmosphere where everybody had a chance to express his/her opinion.

³ The head of Berekamavan community did not welcome research in the village.

2. The impact of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict on local communities

Intensified military action

The intensified military action in 2014 has had a serious impact on the physical safety and perception of security in border communities. During 2014 the ceasefire was violated both by the Azerbaijani and Armenian army. Although such ceasefire violations were already a part of everyday life in the selected communities, shootings became more regular and intensive starting June 2014. They reached a peak in August. Community members described August as “a war” as for two weeks there were intensive attacks from the Azerbaijani side alongside a significant part of the border line with Armenia.

“They shoot every day, there is no day without shooting”, said villagers in Nerkin Karmiraghbyur and Chinari. People in Aygepar, Movses, Vazashen, Baghanis, and Berkaber agreed, highlighting that they also are close to military action every day. Sometimes shooting lasts up to four hours.

Villagers from Voskevan and Baghanis describe the situation as being in a war, especially during the last several months. Sometimes military action becomes so intense that people have to evacuate. *“Our home came under direct fire from the Azerbaijani side, it looked like another war, and I took the grandchildren and walked to a nearby village, from where our friend drove us with his car to the city”,* said a 57-year-old woman from Barekamavan village.

Villagers in the affected communities say they are fired on by arms of various calibers, and with varying intensity. Villagers consider sniper fire to be the most dangerous, since it is specifically targeted at individuals. Around Movses, grenade launchers and machine-gun fire are especially intense at night. In Paravakar people hear fire directed at Verin Karmiraghbyur, especially at night. Big caliber machine-guns also fire at village houses and cultivated land. A significant part of houses in the selected communities were damaged as a result of fire by large caliber guns from the Azerbaijani military posts.

Villagers in most border communities say that they cannot cultivate their lands fully. *“Whenever they see a tractor or another machine working in the field, they start firing”,* said a villager in Chinari, with reference to the Azerbaijani military. *“We could not work this summer in the gardens and fields outside, it was too dangerous because of shootings, we just cultivated the land near our houses”,* said another woman from Nerkin Karmiraghbyur. Since mid-August, the situation became calmer, but shootings nevertheless continue.

Villagers say they need to build or renovate and properly furnish shelters in which they can seek refuge during intensive shootings. For example, there is a big shelter in Nerkin Karmiraghbyur. It does, however, require refurbishment. As of now, it does not have the conditions and equipment for people to stay when there is sustained fire over 2–3 hours, as regularly happens in the village.

At this point, villagers continue to worry about their life, their health, and their chances of a viable future as violations of ceasefire continue. Several high-level meetings by the Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents during the past year have not had a discernible impact on the ground.

The general perception of the population is that the Armenian army keeps to the obligations of the ceasefire and only responds to Azerbaijani attacks, especially in cases when Armenians have human losses or when the attacks from the Azerbaijani side intensify.

Human losses and injuries

The communities suffer human loss and injuries as a result of military action. In Chinari, 12 civilians were injured by targeted shootings over the last two years. One person became disabled after stepping on a mine. In July 2014 in Paravakar, a 15-year-old boy working in a garden was wounded by direct fire.

In Aygepar village, a 16-year-old girl was wounded by direct fire. She could not be transferred to hospital for a long time as the only road from the village to the regional centre was closed due to intensive large caliber gun fire. Also in Aygepar, a man and his son suffered burns while being asleep in their house. After being targeted from Azerbaijani lines in August 2014, their house had caught fire. The neighbors helped them escape their house. Both were hospitalised.

In May 2013, a Baghanis villager was killed by direct fire from the Azerbaijani military positions.

A special concern in the border communities is the treatment of Armenians who fall into Azerbaijani hands. These cases are known to practically everyone, and add to the sense of threat. In 2014 there were four cases of Armenian civilians who were seized by Azerbaijani forces, apparently after losing their direction and venturing onto Azerbaijani-controlled territory.

One of the captives, Karen Petrosyan from Chinari died two days after being captured. A video produced by the Azerbaijani army portrayed Petrosyan as a saboteur. Local villagers and the Armenian army maintain that he was a peaceful civilian, was in ordinary clothing, not armed, and had no connection to the army. Azerbaijani officials reported that his death was caused by heart problems. His former neighbours, as the broader public in Armenia, believe he was tortured and killed, and saw evidence of his brutal treatment in the video material provided by Azerbaijani authorities.

Three other Armenian civilians were returned to Armenia. 21-year-old Arsen Khodjoyan of Verin Karmiraghbyur lost his way and crossed the border on 7 March 2014. He was returned to Armenia by the Azerbaijani side in the beginning of April. He reported that he was not tortured, which was confirmed by medical examinations.

According to doctors, however, there were signs of torture on another man, 77-year-old Mamikon Khodjoyan, also from Verin Karmiraghbyur. Khodjoyan died in Armenia in May 2014, a few weeks after he had been returned by the Azerbaijani side. He had crossed the border on 28 January and been held for approximately two months. The fourth captive, 53-year-old Sargys Ananyan, is currently in bad health. Originally from Ijevan, he had crossed the border on 26 August and was returned to Armenia on 25 September.

In October 2014, Armenian soldier Hakob Injighulyan, also returned to Armenia, via a third country. He had been kept as a prisoner of war by Azerbaijan, after losing his way in poor visibility and crossing on to Azerbaijani territory on 8 August 2013.

On a superficial level, some villagers say they have adapted to their exposed situation. *“We are accustomed to everyday shooting. Isn't it strange that they shoot at night, and we go and mow the grass in the morning?”*, said villagers during focus discussion groups in Chinari and Movses.

Yet deeper down, many highlight the impact of the constant danger. *“Children are nervous and fearful. The other day, a glass fell down, and all kids were in a panic because of the sudden noise”*, said an employee of a kindergarten in one of the villages.

Physical security issues and material damage⁴

Villagers describe the situation in each village in vivid detail. Here the villages are listed in order from north to south.

In **Voskevan**, more than 30 per cent of village houses with their adjacent gardens, almost all internal and intercommunity roads, and the majority of the agricultural land are in the line of fire of the Azerbaijani military positions. The operation of the kindergarten was stopped for a long time because of targeted shooting from the Azerbaijani military posts.

⁴ All data provided in this section are based on focus group discussions and interviews with villagers.

More than 15 inhabited houses in Voskevan were damaged in the last two years. A 'KAMAZ' truck belonging to a villager was damaged by shrapnel in August 2014. A significant part of the agricultural lands was not cultivated because of regular gun fire.

The mines surrounding the village also present a danger to villagers. Many villagers in border communities agreed: *"It is not safe to use pastures, so there is no point in keeping cattle"*, and have consequently decreased the number of cows they keep.

In **Baghanis**, more than 45 per cent of village houses and their adjacent gardens, the internal community roads and a part of village roads, and more than 35–40 per cent of gardens and agricultural land belonging to the village are in the line of fire of the Azerbaijani military. The schools, kindergarten and medical unit are in vulnerable areas.

Eight inhabited houses were damaged in Baghanis. Because of regular intensive shooting of agricultural machines, more than 35 per cent of agricultural lands were left uncultivated. The amount of cattle also decreased as villagers do not consider the pastures secure because of mines and shootings. In 2011, cattle had been killed by stepping on a mine.

The 8 km-long Baghanis–Voskepar road, which also connects Yerevan and Tbilisi, is often closed because of shootings.

In **Vazashen** there was much material damage. This included houses, hen-houses and other adjacent buildings. Villagers are not able to cultivate land, and much of the harvest was burnt as a result of gun fire. During the intensive shooting of August 2014, the villagers evacuated children and elderly to safer places.

In **Paravakar** more than 30 per cent of the village, including houses with their adjacent land, internal roads, and 70 per cent of land of agricultural importance, are directly in the line of fire of the Azerbaijani military posts. Agricultural machines are targeted whenever they are seen, so the land cannot be cultivated. This further constrains the village, as agricultural land is already limited. About 1200 hectares (ha) of the cultivated fertile land belonging to the village is currently under control of Azerbaijan. Moreover, there are mines in the vineyards, making their cultivation dangerous, too.

Paravakar has been under sniper fire during summer harvest time, which paralysed all agricultural works in August. The summer shootings also lightly damaged several houses. During last the two years about ten private cars were damaged by shrapnel. Some 3–4 years ago, a 'ZIL 131' truck exploded on a mine, and villagers were not able to move it to a safer place for several weeks because of targeted fire. Regularly, about 4–5 times during a year, the Berd-Paravakar-Ijevan highway is closed for weeks, which has a negative impact on social and economic life of the village.

In **Nerkin Karmiraghbyur**, 70 per cent of inhabited houses were damaged during the 2014 summer shootings. The villagers expect shooting every day at any time. The surrounding areas of the village are mined. 70–80 per cent of fertile land is not cultivated. *"This year we did not work in the fields. We only worked nearby our houses, so we only have the crop from our adjacent gardens"*, said two women in Nerkin Karmiraghbyur. Another woman added that *"Our village is famous for its blood oranges. This year I did not try even one fruit, we could not take care of the trees."*

The village of **Aygepar** is targeted by intensive fire, especially during the summer time, mainly by snipers and grenade launchers. The whole administrative territory of the village, including houses and their adjacent gardens, as well as internal roads are vulnerable to direct targeting from the Azerbaijani military positions. The school and kindergarten are also in the line of potential fire. The kindergarten is often closed because of shootings. *"Kids are hiding every time they hear a loud knock. We even tried to play with them with toy firecrackers to relieve them from the strong fear they feel"*, said a community member in Aygepar.

In Aygepar about 10ha are not cultivated because of the risk of shootings. This agricultural land is the most fertile, has a good irrigation system and constitutes more than 60 per cent of the village's agricultural land.

Forty-six inhabited houses were damaged by recent shootings in Aygepar. Two houses were set ablaze by shootings. The villagers immediately called the Ministry of Extraordinary Situations and helped the inhabitants escape their houses. Although the fire engine arrived quickly, it could not enter the village due to intensive gunfire. The intensive gunfire also prevented the neighbors from helping. The two houses burnt down, with all the property inside. There were 3 cases of gun and shrapnel shooting at private cars. In one instance in November 2014, while the ICRC visited the village and its representatives were standing near a newly built safety wall alongside the kindergarten, a car was shot at 4–5 times by a sniper from the Azerbaijani side.⁵

The village roads Aygepar-Movses and Aygepar-Nerkin Karmiraghbyur were closed for being dangerous.

In **Movses**, more than 50 per cent houses with their adjacent gardens, almost all internal roads, 30 per cent (200–300ha) of agricultural land and 50 per cent of gardens, both fertile and well-irrigated, are directly in the line of fire. Villagers in Movses say that the everyday shootings, mainly by snipers, intensify especially during the harvest period. This year, the Azerbaijani started to use grenade-launchers, which further threaten the safety of the villagers. Targeted fire at agricultural machines meant that 60 per cent of fields and gardens could not be cultivated. Due to intensive fire, in 2014 about 1ha of wheat harvest was not collected, and other wheat harvest was collected at nighttime. Several years ago, a combine harvester and around 6ha of wheat fields were destroyed as a result of fire caused by direct fire from large-caliber machine guns.

The villagers also face a danger of mines in the pastures surrounding the village. During the last two years, three cows were killed by mine explosions. Because of the mined pastures, the villagers decreased the number of cattle.

In Movses a commission composed of government and village representatives documented damages to 180 houses (30 per cent) of the village as a result of the summer shootings. However, according to the village administration, 39 inhabited houses, the building of the church, city administration and other public institutions were not included in the list. During last two years about 20 private cars were damaged by shrapnel. Also, the village gas pipeline was damaged by direct fire from Azerbaijani military positions.

Villagers in Movses also mention that a few years ago there was a so-called diversion attack onto Armenian positions. This left a deep impression on them. The shortest road connecting the Movses village with the regional and marz centres is closed.

In **Chinari**, more than 90 per cent of the village houses with adjacent gardens are in range of Azerbaijani positions, as are almost all internal and intercommunity roads and more than 80 per cent of the cultivated land belonging to the village. The buildings of the school and kindergarten are directly visible from Azerbaijani military positions, which are 500–600 meters away.

“It's very dangerous at the kindergarten, but children need to play with one another, so I send our daughter to kindergarten. I am looking forward to the time when she will attend school, which is safer than the kindergarten”, said a 25-year-old woman of Chinari of the beginning of 2014. (Later in 2014, she and her daughter left the village and moved to a safer part of Armenia). *“The kindergarten is not a safe place, but our houses are not safe either”,* said another woman from Chinari. The kindergarten was not operational for a long time because of the threat of gun fire.

⁵ Based on discussion at the focus group discussion in Aygepar, November 2014.

More than 160 houses (60 per cent) were damaged in Chinari as a result of direct fire in the summer 2014. The government provided owners of 158 houses with material compensation. About 10 houses, the kindergarten and other public buildings have not received compensation yet. About 10 cars were damaged by shrapnel. The most recent case was registered September 2014, when a 'Gas 66' car belonging to a Chinari villager was shot in the central part of the village.

The Azerbaijani military also regularly target agricultural machinery. Villagers say that this has resulted in more than 80 per cent of agricultural lands and gardens not being cultivated. In one recent case in July 2014, a combine harvester was targeted by long-distance gun fire. The incident apparently took place during the visit of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The number of cattle has decreased because of the mined pastures.

Some communities, such as Movses and Chinari in July 2014, applied to the ICRC to help secure safety during agricultural works. Villagers say that these attempts have not brought any result. On 26 July the ICRC had to stop its activities on securing the agricultural work of the Chinari community because of targeted shootings from Azerbaijani military positions. There were no victims, though the ICRC car had minor damages.

Social and health concerns

People have suffered as a consequence of their hardship. In almost all affected villages, people report an increase of diseases that are caused by stress. These include heart disease and diabetes, also among children. In Chinari, people say that disease rates have gone up by 60 per cent. In Movses people say the number of sick people has increased by a third, over recent years.

When something happens, help can be hard to reach. *"I started to bleed at night, when we heard intensive shootings. Yet they could only transport me to hospital in the morning, because the shootings did not stop. I spent 10 days in the hospital, and since then I still feel the consequences of that night..."*, said a 72 old woman in Movses in a focus group discussion.

In almost all villages, people have left for safety reasons. Some numbers illustrate the broader trend: five or six families have left Paravakar. During the last two years, seven families have left their homes in Chinari. While 187 students attended secondary school in Chinari in 2008, only 103 students were attending the school in 2014. The number of children in kindergarten also decreased from 45 in 2008 to 20 in 2014, more than halving in six years.

The families are concerned about the safety of their children. The majority of schools and kindergartens remain in the line of fire of Azerbaijani military posts, even though villagers note that some changes were made to increase protection, and that the buildings now also are renovated. The worry about the children's future contributes to migration.

School administration and teachers say that the decrease in the number of pupils causes problems for the school administration, as schools receive funding according to the number of pupils.

Similarly, education fees are a problem for parents whose children enter universities. Recently, the government did reduce fees for higher education for students from the border communities. However, there is insufficient information in the communities. The scheme is not made clear to students and their parents.

In Nerkin Karmiraghbyur a community member said that his son and all his male schoolmates, who are now 25-years-old, believe that it would be very hard to get married. They do not think that it is viable to have a family with the current lack of security and

the poor economic conditions. This concern was also mentioned in Paravakar. In that village, too, the birth rate has decreased by 15 per cent.⁶

In Movses, children of families that had migrated typically came back to spend their summer vacations in the village. This tradition no longer continues because of safety risks.

A major problem in border communities is the lack of drinking water. In Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, the community head for years has tried to reconstruct the water infrastructure with assistance of various donors. However, some parts of the village still have no running water in their homes, and there is a need for a bigger irrigation system to serve the community needs. *“I will work on this problem more and more until the whole village has no water problem”*, said the community head. In Berkaber, the households have not had running drinking water for years.

In Berkaber, villagers complained about the absence of gasification in the village. *“My children have just left the village. So now I live alone and cannot take the 20-gas container to the city to fill it. It would be good if there is a service to bring the filled gas containers to the village”*, said a 55-year-old woman in Berkaber.

Villagers also said that there is insufficient medical service. Although there are medical units in the border communities, staffed with nurses and a visiting doctor, the units need to be better equipped and staffed. Many villagers cannot afford medical examination and treatment in hospital. In Berkaber, a 58-year-old woman highlighted the case of her 9-year-old granddaughter who suffers from epilepsy. *“We spend about 400 US dollars monthly to pay for expensive medicine. Thus, the girl’s father works in Russia for 9 months every year to take care for these expenses. Both of my sons and their wives have higher education, but they cannot find a job in the village.”*

In all communities people emphasised that there was a lack of cultural and social activities that bring people together.

3. How conflict impacts are currently managed

The border communities are active in trying to improve the situation in their villages.

The communities of Chinari, Paravakar, Aygepar, Movses, Baghanis and Voskevan have raised their issues in front of the Marz administration of Tavush, the President of Armenia, the Government of Armenia, including the Prime Minister, Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, deputies of the Parliament and others. They have appealed to the OSCE and the ICRC regarding safety issues. They have actively engaged local and international funds and organisations, including the All-Armenian Fund, Armenian Relief Fund for Assistance, Social Investment Fund, Armenian Red Cross Society, World Vision Armenia, and the United Nations World Food Program.

A number of businesses have also provided assistance. These businesses include VivaCell MTS, Orange Armenia, Grand Tobacco, Ecogarden production company and Kilikia beer company. Members of the Armenian diaspora from different parts of the world helped almost all villages to undertake construction works, to purchase equipment, and develop social projects. The communities also actively cooperate with mass media, which covers their issues regularly through the national channels, newspapers and internet.

This collaboration with various governmental and non-governmental donors have helped the border communities to address a number of issues.

In 2013 and 2014, the government of Armenia relieved the villagers of the land tax. Similarly, the payment for irrigation water was reduced by 50 per cent. Students from

⁶ Data on the situation in schools and health conditions were provided by employees of corresponding institutions in the border villages.

border villages were granted a 30 per cent reduction on their tuition fees, starting with the second semester of education (although, as noted above, the programme is not well known). Since 2014, the government have subsidised agricultural loans for those in the border communities. These now are available at an interest of 6 per cent annually, significantly below the commercial rate. The Ministry of Social Security is considering a scheme to provide the communities with receiving compensation for bank account funds lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which would be an additional privilege.

With regards to the border villages, the National Assembly adopted two laws in November 2014: the laws will grant tax privileges for businesses operating in border villages. Moreover, communities that are defined as 'border-guarding villages' will receive a number of further benefits, in line with previous practice. These privileges will include tax reductions on land and property and a price reduction of 50 per cent on utilities including gas, household water and irrigation water and electricity. The new law also envisions an increase of financial support by 100 per cent which will be used on community needs, based on decisions of the community councils. Additionally, the new legislation provides for compensation and covering medical costs for death and injuries caused by Azerbaijani shootings or by mine explosion.

The government's support to border villages increased in 2014. All owners of houses which were damaged by shootings in 2014 received compensation. Governmental commissions, which also included a local representative, documented the inhabited damaged houses and estimated the damage. Compensation was provided based on this process. While the majority of owners received compensation, there were houses, including of public institutions, which were not included in the lists of damaged property. For example in Chinari, according to the local administration, more than ten inhabited houses, the kindergarten and buildings of the village administration were damaged but not included in the commission's list. During focus group discussions, many villagers complained that the compensation was not equal to the material damage and estimations for renovation were lower than local market prices.

The Armenian government funded reconstruction of security walls, schools, kindergartens, and community administration buildings. While renovating the public buildings, the construction crew decided to reduce the size of windows facing the Azerbaijani military posts by two thirds, for example in Chinari and Nerkin Karmiraghbyur. The reconstruction of schools, kindergartens, medical service points and security walls also was supported by other donors such as the Social Investment Fund, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as World Vision Armenia, Armenian Red Cross Society, Armenian Relief Society, local businesses and the diaspora.

The government has funded the construction of some roads, such a 3.5km road to replace the dangerous part of Paravakar-Vazashen. However, all villages need reconstruction of internal roads, in addition to the roads connecting to other villages and cities.

Outside support also helped some of the communities to improve the water supply, both for irrigation and potable water. Water lines were repaired and upgraded with assistance of the government, the International Red Cross Society, local business and diaspora. In Baghanis the government funded the reconstruction of the irrigation system for 12ha of vineyards. Various foundations and diaspora members helped to expand the irrigation systems to individual households and gardens. In Chinari, too, some waterpipes were reconstructed by donations from NGOs and public of Armenia. In Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, parts of drinking water system were repaired and upgraded with funding from various donors. At the same time, there still is a need to repair more irrigation pipelines and bring water to more parts of the village.

The lack of agricultural equipment is being addressed through various governmental and non-governmental programmes. Thus, the village of Paravakar has received a

combine harvester, a tractor and other machinery. Movses is also expecting some other machinery through a governmental programme. Villagers believe that each community should have its own equipment not only for economic reasons but also because work with harvesters and tractors is so dangerous that local villagers are better prepared to use the machinery in dangerous situations. Villagers say that they had stopped renting machinery from other communities, as they were exposed to too much fire from Azerbaijani positions. Villagers felt that they could not take the risks to property with borrowed equipment and could also not ask people from outside the community to operate the machinery.

In other agricultural support, the communities received seeds and plants from the Armenian Red Cross Society and green houses by Heifer International. In Berkaber, some villagers already have increased their income by growing vegetables in green houses. Others have started to use the green houses in autumn 2014.

A number of donors are also active in delivering social programmes. In addition to governmental support, NGOs, such as the Armenian Relief Fund, UN World Food Program, local business and diaspora help the communities to improve the social conditions in public schools and kindergartens by donating sports equipment, renovating sports halls, as well as providing food for daily care in kindergartens and some schools.

Several business companies take an active role in assisting border villages, such as Grand Tobacco, local telecommunication providers, VivaCell-MTS and Orange Armenia. Viva-Cell MTS started a programme to provide construction loans to border community members and in Nerkin Karmiraghbyur 40 households expressed their interest in the programme.

While there is extensive support, there remain many issues in border villages to be addressed. These include the need for further security measures, for more supply of drinking and irrigation water, and the need to improve roads. Moreover, people in the villages need more employment opportunities, and more opportunities to cultivate their land. Communities also still lack cultural activities.

Villagers do say that they are satisfied with mass media coverage of their problems but they also believe that there is a need for more communication with the national and Marz government, with donor organisations. Better communication would help to address concrete issues and plan comprehensive development programmes.

4. How management of conflict impacts could be improved

During the focus group discussions and interviews local community members expressed their situation as “our village became synonymous with war, shootings, emigration, as well as being a heroic border guard, and skilled land cultivator” (Chinari), as being “a border-guarding community” (Paravakar), and “a real arena of military actions” (Aygepar and Movses). Community members of Nerkin Karmiraghbyur said that “*these are not the actions of a real war, they [i.e. Azerbaijanis] just try out various military techniques on us*”.

When asked how security, economic and social issues could be managed better, the communities came up with concrete suggestions. They highlighted that many of these measures would need to be undertaken by the central government, and are beyond local control. Other issues may still be useful to consider on a more local level. Some of the suggested solutions already are underway, as highlighted in the previous section.

All communities mentioned the following points as necessary steps in improving management of the conflict impacts:

- a) Signing agreement of durable peace, restoration of a ceasefire regime;
- b) Construction of security walls, construction and proper furnished refuges, planting fast-growing trees to provide visual shelter for the villages from snipers and other kinds of fire;
- c) Granting the border villages a special status, which would give them certain economic and social benefits;
- d) Broad tax privileges;
- e) 100 per cent reduction of expenses on gas, electricity and education. Provision of health insurance;
- f) Job creation in the area of agricultural product processing, provision with agricultural machinery. Villagers of Paravakar suggested that a wine factory in their area could be reopened. Respondents of Aygepar also highlighted a wine and a tobacco factory that could be reopened. They also thought that canned food processing could be a promising business opportunity. Movses community members stressed that local products should be promoted in markets. They mentioned a semi-precious stone mine in the territory of village which they thought had significant potential;
- g) Improvement of village medical units: increasing medical staff, improving equipment and means of transportation;
- h) Creation or improvement of firefighting and rescue units, providing firefighting equipment to schools, kindergartens, other public buildings and dispersion of the equipment throughout all districts in the villages. Training of the population in using the firefighting equipment.
- i) Creation and organisation of social and cultural events, including sport activities, concerts, film screenings and theatre performances.

A number of other measures addressing physical, economic and social security and development issues were also suggested by the selected communities.

Physical security measures:

- a) Placement of international peacekeeping forces at the Line of Contact were mentioned by the respondents from Chinari, Aygepar, Paravakar and Movses;
- b) Villagers of Chinari, Voskevan, Vazashen and Baghanis consider removal of snipers from the Line of Contact as a necessary step for security and development;
- c) Liquidation of rival military posts was mentioned by community members of Chinari, Aygepar, Movses, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur and Baghanis;
- d) Increased public awareness on security issues were outlined in Chinari, Movses, Baghanis, Vazashen and Voskevan communities;
- e) In Chinari and Voskevan it was suggested that recruits of compulsory military service from their villages serve their army terms in their own villages;
- f) Aygepar community members expressed an opinion that men of military service age in the border-guarding communities should be provided with military ammunition.

Economic security and development measures:

- a) Compensation through state subsidies for losses caused by inability to cultivate land was mentioned by community members of Chinari, Vazashen and Voskevan;
- b) Zero interest loan rates to villagers of border communities was mentioned in Paravakar and Movses;
- c) State-funded business trips of specialists in various areas, and/or employment of necessary specialists were highlighted in Chinari, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, Voskevan, and Movses;

- d) Implementation of the community economic development programme was mentioned in Paravakar;
- e) Villagers of Vazashen mentioned that measures and proper conditions should be created to help cultivate the land left currently uncultivated.

Addressing social issues:

- a) Promotion of a higher birth rate, including through financial incentives was mentioned in Aygepar, Paravakar and Movses;
- b) Reduction of obligatory payments to cumulative pension funds was suggested by respondents from Paravakar; reduced income tax and other payments (for example for electricity and gas) for specialists from other communities working in border villages was suggested during the discussion in Berkaber;
- c) State subsidies to public institutions, including village administration and schools, were suggested by respondents of Chinari, Movses, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, Aygepar, Berkaber communities;
- d) Improvement of infrastructure of drinking and irrigation water systems were mentioned by people in Paravakar, Movses, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur;
- e) Special recognition of their communities as border-guarding communities was mentioned in Berkaber, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, and Vazashen ;
- f) In Movses, it was suggested that one should establish contacts between village leaders of border communities of Armenia and Azerbaijan;
- g) Community members in Nerkin Karmiraghbyur emphasised that they do not raise their children in hostility to Azerbaijanis, while they worry that Azerbaijani propaganda promotes hatred towards Armenians.

Some urgent current needs were also outlined, including:

- a) In Paravakar, the creation of a firefighting-rescue unit, renovation and proper furnishing of the medical unit, provision of bed clothing for 35 children at the kindergarten.
- b) In Aygepar, the renovation of multi-flat buildings, furnishing of the village shelter used during intensive fire, a firefighting unit, the renovation of internal roads and security walls in the village, repair or procurement of instruments which were destroyed as a result of fire.
- c) In Movses, the renovation of the building provided to the firefighting-rescue unit, for which the community is ready to provide financial and labour means.

5. Conclusion

Security

Although a number of security measures are taken by the communities to reduce the risks of shootings from the military posts, these measures are often initiated through cooperation of communities with NGOs. They often are more on a project-basis, and thus can lack long-term systematic approach and sustainability.

In almost all villages security walls have been constructed nearby schools and kindergartens, and fast-growing trees have been planted at places of high visibility. During renovation of some schools and kindergartens, the size of windows facing the military posts were reduced by 2/3 to increase safety of children.

However, the majority of schools and kindergartens remain in the line of fire from the Azerbaijani military posts. Only in very few cases are new buildings for community institutions built in a safer place, such as a new kindergarten building in Voskevan.

In some villages, works on building firefighting units have started. However, all the villages mention the necessity for having such units, as the cases of fire caused by

shootings at houses and harvest are regular, and the community has no skills and equipment to contain and extinguish the fire. The communities also mention the necessity that firefighting equipment should be in more places, in different parts of the villages and in public buildings, so that fires can be dealt with immediately. In addition to supplying the materials, the population should be trained in using them.

The villagers welcome various types of construction and refurbishment in their communities. They also believe that these projects should involve community members and provide them with short-term income. This approach seems to be important also in terms of increasing the participatory and inclusive mode of community decision-making and implementation of projects.

The OSCE Monitoring Group is considered as having little positive impact. In Nerkin Karmiraghbyur, villagers said that *“before and after each visit of the OSCE Monitoring Group, the Azerbaijani military posts shoot intensively, as a demonstrative act”*. The issue of security was raised as crucial at all the meetings, and various measures to improve the situation were suggested, including removal of snipers from the Line of Contact, liquidation or occupation of military posts, and signing agreement on cease-fire and durable peace.

Economic situation

Villagers are not satisfied with the economic situation in their communities. Families mostly manage to subsist by producing their own food in their adjacent gardens, but beyond this they have few opportunities for generating income.

As cultivation of land and cattle is the main income for villagers, military actions of Azerbaijani troops, and mined pastures and gardens inhibits their agricultural work and greatly constrains their income. There are few jobs in the villages. The main available employment is at public institutions and in shops.

Several measures were suggested by the villagers to improve the economic conditions, including tax privileges, job creation through restoration and creation of small-size factories, including wine making, tobacco production, food-processing, sewing clothes for the army and other needs. It was also mentioned that the agricultural and other types of loans should be provided to the border communities for no interest rate. The main obstacles for the economic development still are the unsecure conditions for cultivating fields and gardens and using pastures, and insufficient irrigation water provision. Because of lack of income, many villagers leave to seek jobs in other places to be able to support their families. Some initiatives were implemented by assisting organisations, such as providing green houses to the villagers, where they can raise vegetables.

The poor state of the roads also make market access harder. It is hard to get produce to regional and Marz cities. Conversely, transporting goods to the villages is also expensive, and getting essential products in village shops is much more expensive. Villagers agreed that an improvement of roads within villages and between them is a priority.

Community life

Border villages take care that their communities look neat and attractive. In some villages, such as Movses and Baghanis, a proper trash collection is organised with the diaspora's assistance. In Chinari, there are roses everywhere, as the village head has actively promoted the growing of these flowers. In Baghanis, five districts are lighted at evenings, and bus stops have recently been renovated.

Schools and kindergartens are well renovated, some have excellent sports facilities, food is provided at kindergartens and in some schools. While all communities have medical units, they need to be better staffed and furnished. The medical units provide some types of medicine for free and have visiting doctors. The villagers considered

the medical service to be insufficient still and said that it needed improvement. They also said that the stressful conditions of their life made medical insurance particularly important.

Although the government has recently provided compensation to owners of houses that were damaged by military attacks, the villagers in general consider the compensation to be insufficient for adequate repairs. To smooth out the system of compensation for renovation of damaged properties, experts suggest that the villages appoint a member from the community, preferably within the staff of the rescue/firefighting unit or the community administration, to be responsible for consistent documentation of material damage. This individual could then present the findings on damage to relevant institutions, to ensure timely and appropriate assistance in renovation/procurement of the lost/damaged property.

The poor condition of drinking and irrigation water systems continue to have an impact on households and agriculture. Several important measures were taken to solve the problem in various communities. At the same time access to water remains one of acute problems for the border communities.

According to villagers, decision making is mainly organised through operations of the local government heads and village councils, which have regular meetings. The mayor of Baghanis village produced a report on his activities during the previous two years, discussed it with the community members and published it in the media. Villagers held this up as a positive example of communicating with people in their community.

Lack of social and cultural activities

Villagers say consistently that there is a lack of social and cultural activities. The main social activity is the celebration of national holidays. Although there are some community centres, little activity is taking place in them at this point. The communities said they would prefer to have more film screenings, theatre performances, and concerts.

Local initiative does manage to organise some remarkable events. For example, the mayor of Baghanis organised a summer camp for 120 children of 8–13-year-olds in Baghanis in 2014. Villagers said that the camp energised and motivated the children, whose life otherwise is overshadowed by everyday safety concerns.

In all communities it was emphasised that children should have an opportunity to learn music, arts, and various crafts, in addition to their school classes. They welcome such events to be organised by all organisations but insisted that state funding is necessary to secure that classes are offered consistently, beyond specific project funding.

In the focus groups, villagers also mentioned other educational problems. They highlighted that in their view it is hard to organise a proper learning process within the current system of funding for secondary schools. They would prefer if a different funding system could be considered for border villages. Moreover, they suggested additional incentives and privileges for teachers⁷ in border communities, and that parents should be relieved from payments for textbooks and higher education fees.

The role of the government, local and international organisations and diaspora

Government plays a central role for border communities as the villages only have small budgets available locally, and villagers have insufficient income to fully help themselves.

Villagers say that government only recently started to pay more attention to their needs. They welcomed the adoption of two laws in November 2014 but highlighted that there are many problems which need to be addressed in the near future to improve the management of economic, social and security affairs in the border communities.

⁷ Although there are some privileges for the staff of public institutions in border communities (such as sponsored vacation in resorts), many villagers had little knowledge about them.

Villagers believe that the government should develop a systematic approach for the economic development and security issues of the border villages, through a participatory mode of consultation and ongoing involvement of community members.

Special attention should be given to secondary school administration and organisation of additional classes to provide children with opportunity for enriched and harmonic education.

Villagers say that in 2014 the communities were visited by many public figures, due to the tense situation at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. They hope that this translates into concrete measures that will improve life in their communities.

The border villages, mainly through village heads, in some places also other public institutions, cooperate with various organisations and welcome more engagement of the society and various structures in addressing current issues of their villages. Villagers emphasise that they expect a special attention of the society and government towards their communities. They mainly are satisfied with the work of mass media in covering their issues.

The villagers appreciate the role of local and international business and diaspora in providing assistance to their community needs. In some communities, the diaspora is a key player in improving management of communities, such as trash collection, irrigation system, renovation of public buildings, provision with necessary equipment, like granting a firefighting machine to Movses village, and supporting the community in various humanitarian projects.

It is important that the budget of the border communities is increased, so that the community administration, including the head and the council, can themselves address issues, including the reconstruction of roads and water provision systems. As was suggested by the villagers, they can provide implementation of more cost-effective projects if the funding is given directly to their budgets. Villagers also stressed that they should be consulted before projects are undertaken through public hearings and other types of participation, and that community members should be involved in implementing the projects.

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

COVER PHOTO: A road leading to the village of Chinari, Armenia, July 2014. © NANA GAMKRELIDZE



SAFERWORLD

The Grayston Centre
28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0)20 7324 4646

Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

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