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# Crisis, Resilience & Long-Term Solutions: Mapping The Needs Of Displaced People Living In Armenia



March 2024

***Estonian Refugee Council (ERC) is a value-driven non-governmental EU-certified humanitarian organization.***

***Established in 2000, ERC currently provides humanitarian assistance to displaced and vulnerable individuals across five crisis-affected countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Jordan, Armenia, and Türkiye.***

***Additionally, it offers various support services to beneficiaries of international protection living in Estonia***

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**Recommended Citation:** Estonian Refugee Council. (2024, March). *Crisis, Resilience & Long-Term Solutions: Mapping the Needs of Displaced People Living in Armenia*. <https://www.pagulasabi.ee/et/media/1314>

First published in 2024 by the Estonian Refugee Council  
Rüütli 4, Tartu  
Estonia 51007  
Reg, code 80137003  
Original language: English

[pagulasabi.ee](http://pagulasabi.ee)

**Cover Photo:** David Ghahramanyan (Reuters)

**Cover Design:** Kanchi Ganatra & Olivia Jõgi (Estonian Refugee Council)

**Author(s):** Kanchi Ganatra (Estonian Refugee Council)  
[kanchi.ganatra@pagulasabi.ee](mailto:kanchi.ganatra@pagulasabi.ee)



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## KEY FINDINGS

- **1 in every 21** people currently residing in Armenia has experienced forced displacement. This includes **531 stateless persons, 628 asylum seekers, and 34,757 refugees** recorded by UNHCR as of mid-2023, and **115,183 people arriving from Karabakh** after renewed hostilities in September 2023.
- **8% of all residents require support**, encompassing forcibly displaced individuals and an **additional 95,000** members of the host community.
- **Conditions** had been **worsening in Nagorno-Karabakh** for **ten months** before 2023 hostilities due to a **blockade** rendering the **Lachin corridor inaccessible** to all civilian and commercial traffic.
- Blockade had caused **severe shortages of basic necessities** including **food, medicines, and fuel** among others, contributing to a **significant increase** of health issues in **women and children** including **immunodeficiency, anaemia, thyroid disease, and worsened diabetes**.
- **Humanitarian aid**, including **government assistance**, was identified as the **primary source of food for displaced people**.
- An estimated **2,070 women** who had fled Karabakh were **pregnant** as of October 19. Approximately **1,380** of these were **expected to give birth in the following 6 months**.
- Professional **mental health and psychosocial support** services are **lacking in all communities**. An estimated **22,500 displaced persons** will need dedicated mental health services.
- Building **long-term resilience** among displaced people could entail **shelter support, job placement, self-employment opportunities, and the provision of income-generating tools**, particularly in the **agricultural sector**.

## Introduction

In early 2024, the Estonian Refugee Council (ERC) carried out a comprehensive secondary data review (SDR) regarding the current situation of displaced people and other groups of concern in the South Caucasus, specifically in Armenia. The SDR included examination of independent sources produced by humanitarian actors working actively on the ground as well as other relevant sources such as reputable news outlets, academic materials, maps; etc.

The main objectives of this data triangulation exercise were:

1. To collate available information regarding the needs of displaced people recently arrived in Armenia as well as other potential beneficiaries who may be in need of humanitarian support;
2. To identify gaps in existing knowledge and evaluate whether further collection of primary data is required and feasible;
3. To use the gathered knowledge for designing future ERC interventions in Armenia, while avoiding duplication of efforts carried out by other actors including the local government, NGOs and INGOs.

## Methodology

### Sources:

To ensure robust triangulation, this SDR draws from reports and datasets collected manually via platforms like Reliefweb, HDX, UNHCR's Operational Data Portal, ARMSTAT, etc. Additionally, it incorporates insights gained from interviews and assessments conducted by other actors on the ground such as Amnesty International, Action Against Hunger USA (AAH), and the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR).

**Amnesty International** was among one of the first international actors bringing attention to conditions faced by people of Nagorno-Karabakh during the blockade preceding the renewed hostilities in the region in September 2023. Their team conducted 16 phone interviews with de facto officials, healthcare professionals and residents of Nagorno-Karabakh. They shared their findings in this [news release](#)<sup>1</sup> published on 9 February 2023.

Similarly, **Action Against Hunger USA** shared direct [insights](#)<sup>2</sup> obtained through interviews with displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh. The interview results were posted on their website on November 21, 2023, shortly after the influx of migrants in Armenia increased.

The **Inter-Agency Rapid Needs Assessment** (RNA)<sup>3</sup> was conducted between 9 and 13 October 2023, at the community-level. It involved 43 UN agencies' multi-functional teams interviewing 89 key informants (39 men, 50 women), across 29 communities in 10 regions and Yerevan. Key

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International. (2023, February 9). [Azerbaijan: Blockade of Lachin corridor putting thousands of lives in peril must be immediately lifted](#).

<sup>2</sup> Bernal Arellano, E., & Patterson, K. (2023, November 21). ['Which Future Do We Have?': Stories from Refugees in Armenia](#). Action Against Hunger.

<sup>3</sup> [Rapid needs assessment 3 November 2023](#). Conducted by the UN Inter-Sector Coordination Group Armenia in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and in collaboration with other government ministries, institutions, and civil society organizations. Drafted with support from colleagues at the World Bank.

informants included 11 central government representatives, 47 local authorities, and 31 NGOs/CBOs. For the collection of primary data, a multi-sectoral interview questionnaire was used, complemented by on-site observations. Teams of enumerators collected primary data using digitized questionnaires in Armenian and English. The form was divided into 16 sections, taking approximately 30 minutes each.

### Tools and Frameworks Used:

The secondary research presented here utilized an internally developed [spreadsheet](#), which served as space to collate various resources, organize readings, and cross-reference information from multiple sources, enabling proper triangulation of data. This method was further substantiated by revisiting notes from in-person discussions with humanitarian actors actively operating in Armenia. Said discussions, which took place in December 2023, not only played a crucial role in validating and confirming the data obtained from secondary sources, but also presented opportunities for appropriate direction-setting, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the research findings.

### Challenges

Barriers encountered during the data triangulation included limited or outdated data on humanitarian needs, in general, but especially regarding the needs of refugees from regions other than Nagorno-Karabakh. Disparities in data collection and presentation methodologies among different organizations also hindered direct comparisons.

This paper expresses a medium level of confidence in the information gathered, primarily due to the rapidly changing migration landscape in Armenia. While there is sufficient primary data available regarding the blockade situation leading up to the latest conflict in the region, more recent resources regarding needs, especially needs of refugees from other regions of origin are almost completely absent.



## Historical Context: Decades of Regional Turmoil

While there is an abundance of armed confrontations scattered throughout the area of the former USSR, the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan is worthy of particular note. Not only is the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict one of the earliest to erupt in post-Soviet Transcaucasia,<sup>4</sup> but the intermittent and unpredictable nature of associated clashes, coupled with vested foreign interests, has made it one of the most intractable threats to regional peace and security.



Figure 1 Regional Map [Source: Al Jazeera]

The dispute surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, particularly, can be traced back to the early 1920s - when it was decided that Karabakh would remain under the control of Azerbaijan SSR. This presented a complication as a substantial majority of the Karabakh population was ethnically Armenian, reaching around 90% during certain historical periods.<sup>5, 6, 7</sup> By the time of the dissolution of the USSR, the dispute had spiralled into a full-scale war between the two republics – a clash that has since defied resolution by the international community.

Examining the subsequent decades reveals a persistent pattern. Since the late 1990s, Karabakh has witnessed repeated cycles of militarized conflict and tenuous ceasefire agreements. The **first Nagorno-Karabakh war, which ended in 1994, ushered in a prolonged but unstable status quo.**<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Croissant, M. P. (1998). *The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict: causes and implications*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA. page xi.

<sup>5</sup> Hanson, M. (2020, October 16). [The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Increasingly deadly and destabilising](#). The Interpreter. Lowy Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention. (2024, February 22). [Red flag Alert - Azerbaijan in the Republic of Armenia - Update 2](#).

<sup>7</sup> Center for Preventive Action. (Updated 2024, March 13). [Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict | Global Conflict Tracker](#).

<sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group. (2023, August 2). [Improving Prospects for Peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh War](#).

In 1991, the de facto leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh had declared independence as a self-proclaimed autonomous territory (albeit with a heavy reliance on Armenia). Years of brutal combat had devastated the region, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of nearly a million people.<sup>9, 10</sup> In the ensuing years, parties tried but failed to reach a consensus on various aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Although the 1994 ceasefire was generally observed until 2016, a formal political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had remained elusive. In April 2016, the area experienced renewed escalations resulting in some of the most intense fighting since 1994.<sup>12, 13</sup> By the time an agreement to cease hostilities was reached, four days of intense fighting along the line of separation had already resulted in hundreds of casualties<sup>14, 15</sup>

The situation further deteriorated in 2020 with thousands more killed during six weeks of fierce fighting. Renewed clashes that began on 27 September 2020, marked a dramatic reversal of fortunes, as Azerbaijan swiftly advanced across front lines, reclaiming much of the territory it had lost in 1994.<sup>16</sup> The fighting took a heavy toll, killing thousands of military personnel and leaving tens of thousands displaced. On 9 November 2020, Russia was finally able to broker a ceasefire.

## Build up to the 2023 exodus from Karabakh

While Russian peacekeepers temporarily quelled the fighting in 2020, **tensions had been steadily rising for months leading up to the latest military operation in 2023**. Prior to the surge of violence, many ethnic Armenians had continued to live in the autonomous enclave Nagorno-Karabakh - it had been their home for decades. Even through mid-2022, conditions seemed calm if bleak. Journalist Arshaluis Mghdesyan wrote - Life in Stepanakert was quiet: cafes were open, children played in parks. The calm seemed to have returned to Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto capital since the 2020 war scarred the region, killing thousands and displacing tens of thousands. He likened this peace, however, to a "façade" behind which over 100,000 people lived in fear.<sup>17</sup>

*"Human beings can get used to everything. And we are getting used to this uncertainty and anxiety. [...] We have actually turned off our minds and live like zombies. Otherwise you can go crazy." - Gennady Petrosyan, taxi driver (Stepanakert)*

Only a few months later, uncertainty morphed into severe hardship. On **12 December 2022, the Lachin corridor – the main road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia – became inaccessible to all civilian and commercial traffic** due to a blockade by dozens of Azerbaijani protesters, widely believed to be backed by the country's authorities. This situation left

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<sup>9</sup> Center for Preventive Action (2024).

<sup>10</sup> Croissant, M. P. (1998).

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group (2023, August).

<sup>12</sup> Center for Preventive Action (2024).

<sup>13</sup> BBC News. (2016, April 3). [Nagorno-Karabakh violence: Worst clashes in decades kill dozens.](#)

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group. (2023, November 10). [The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer.](#)

<sup>15</sup> Center for Preventive Action (2024).

<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group (2023, August).

<sup>17</sup> Mghdesyan, A. (2022, July 18). [Nagorny Karabakh's fearful calm.](#) Institute for War and Peace Reporting.



approximately 120,000 ethnic Armenian residents of Karabakh without access to essential goods and services, including life-saving medication and health care. The blockade's consequences were immediate and severe. Most families in Nagorno-Karabakh faced severe hunger, little electricity, and constant fear.

The unfolding humanitarian crisis drew international attention, with various organizations and governmental bodies expressing concern over the dire conditions faced by the residents. Within the first 9 weeks of the blockade, humanitarian actors such as Amnesty International began to rally attention towards the unfolding humanitarian crisis.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, international actors including the European Parliament voiced their concerns stating that it “deplore[d] the tragic humanitarian consequences of the blockade of the Lachin corridor and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.”<sup>19</sup>

*“The blockade has resulted in severe shortages of food and medical supplies, as humanitarian aid delivered by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Russian peacekeepers has been insufficient to meet demand. Disruptions to the supply of electricity, natural gas and vehicle fuel add up to extreme hardship, especially for groups who are vulnerable to discrimination and marginalization. This must end now,” - Marie Struthers, Amnesty International's Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.*

Their interviews conducted with health workers and residents in the region revealed the blockade's particularly harsh impact on at-risk groups including women, older people, and people with disabilities. Access to healthcare had become the most pressing issue in the blockaded region, with a deficit of medicines and medical supplies as well as insufficient fuel to enable outpatient care, particularly affecting older people and people with disabilities, as well as those with chronic health conditions, whose access to healthcare services was severely limited or in some cases completely disrupted.

Vardan Lalayan, a cardiologist at a hospital in Stepanakert said:

*“We are doing 10% of the procedures now. We simply do not have enough stents [...] We will have a very big [number of] heart attacks at home. Every day we lose many people, many patients.”*

According to Nagorno-Karabakh de facto officials, since the blockade began the number of **vehicles arriving in the region had decreased from 1,200 a day to five to six trucks, in February 2023, belonging to the Russian peacekeeping mission and the ICRC.**

According to Vardan Lalayan, the ICRC transferred only those in “stable condition” to facilities outside the region, where care might be available. Patients in a critical condition at his hospital had to remain in a health facility where appropriate care was not available, resulting in several preventable deaths.

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<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International (2023).

<sup>19</sup> European Parliament. (2023, January 19). [Texts adopted - Humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh](#)

Biayna Sukhudyán, a neurologist, told Amnesty International:<sup>20</sup>

*“A week ago, we had a child [with epilepsy] who needed an urgent medication, and we did not have it, and no one had it, stock was empty. [...] After one week, after negotiations with the Red Cross, they managed to send the child for treatment to Yerevan.”*

Women’s and maternal health were also under serious threat due to shortages of medical supplies. Meline Petrosyan, an eight-months pregnant woman from Martakert (Aghdere) town, said:

*“The maternity ward was full [...] The hospital room was often cold because of the electricity shortage. They could only operate one incubator and three premature babies had to take turns using it. When I think about all the uncertainties of giving birth in these conditions, I feel terrified.”*

The blockade had caused a **food shortage**, which led the de facto authorities to introduce a rationing system in early January 2023. According to one resident: “each individual [could] get half a kilo of rice, pasta and one liter of oil and little sugar,” limiting products by one kilo or liter per month per person, regardless of age. Interviewees said that while those efforts had helped prevent spiking prices for essential food products, **fresh vegetables and fruits had completely disappeared from store shelves, while long queues formed for milk and eggs when they did become available.**

Based on Amnesty International’s interviews<sup>21</sup> with residents, it appeared that women typically prioritized giving food to other family members over themselves. Healthcare professionals interviewed by Amnesty International noted a **significant increase in cases of immunodeficiency, anaemia, thyroid disease, and worsened diabetes conditions among women and children, as a direct result of food shortages.**

People with disabilities, including those with limited mobility, said they were suffering from isolation during the blockade, as they were unable to use either public or private transportation due to the lack of fuel. Yakov Altunyan, who uses a wheelchair since both of his legs were amputated after stepping on a mine in the 1990s, was effectively stuck in his apartment.

*“Even since I was injured, I always try to be outside and socialize, because for me being in these four walls means being in a prison. [...] Not being able to drive, to communicate and socialize with others, makes my life very hard,”*

Alongside other actors such as news agencies,<sup>22</sup> Action Against Hunger (AAH) has also collected similar stories<sup>23</sup> from families who suffered the over nine-month blockade. Nora, one of the women who spoke with AAH, was pregnant, but she miscarried due to acute stress and malnutrition. She

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<sup>20</sup> European Parliament. (2023, January 19).

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International (2023).

<sup>22</sup> Harding, L. (2023, August 22). [‘They want us to die in the streets’: inside the Nagorno-Karabakh blockade.](#) *The Guardian*.

<sup>23</sup> Bernal Arellano, E., & Patterson, K. (2023). AAH.

explained that access to health services was limited, and it took Nora over an hour and a half to walk to work. They relied mostly on the potatoes they grew themselves.

For months prior to the conflict, Armine and Sasun, a couple from Karabakh, had already been living off meagre food rations during the blockade. They were given vouchers to buy food, but the amounts were hardly sufficient. A single cabbage could cost over \$16. Furthermore, if they did not use the vouchers to buy food within a two-week period, they missed their opportunity and there would be no telling when the next round of vouchers would arrive.

It is important to note that the blockade of the Lachin corridor and the wider conflict surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh have not only precipitated a dire humanitarian crisis, but also raised significant legal questions under the framework of international law.<sup>24, 25, 26</sup> Former prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno Ocampo, for instance, cited Article II, (c) of the Genocide Convention,<sup>27</sup> arguing that there was “a reasonable basis to believe that a Genocide is being committed against Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.” In his August 2023 report, he further cautioned that “[without] immediate dramatic change, this group of Armenians will be destroyed in a few weeks.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the blockade of the Lachin corridor not only reflects individual narratives of hardship and displacement, but also indicates serious breaches of comprehensive international legal standards, including International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Human Rights Law (IHRL),<sup>29</sup> and the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols,<sup>30</sup> among others.

Despite widely raised legal objections, however, the situation in Karabakh deteriorated throughout 2023. Amid grim conditions and **heightened fears of potential genocide and ethnic cleansing**,<sup>31</sup> the worst-case scenario unfolded for locals as the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence initiated "anti-terror measures" in the Karabakh region on September 19.<sup>32</sup> Tensions swiftly escalated into all-out warfare. Within hours of commencing the operation, the Azerbaijani army regained control of significant territories that were previously in dispute. As the de facto government of the Nagorno-Karabakh urgently called for talks, the Azerbaijani Presidency expressed its willingness to engage with Karabakh Armenians but emphasized that, for the measures to cease, Armenian armed

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<sup>24</sup> Meister, S. (2023, August 29). [Nagorno Karabakh: The rise of authoritarian “Conflict resolution.”](#) German Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>25</sup> Klonowiecka-Milart, A. & Paylan, S. (2023, October 31). [Forced Displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh: A Response.](#) *Opinio Juris*.

<sup>26</sup> Forde, A. (2023, September 27). [Faith no more: Azerbaijan’s abdication of duty towards the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh.](#) *Opinio Juris*.

<sup>27</sup> [Genocide Convention](#) - Article II, (c) states: “Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction.”

<sup>28</sup> Ocampo, L. M. (2023, August 7). [Expert Opinion: Genocide against Armenians in 2023.](#)

<sup>29</sup> Particularly the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#). OCHCR.

<sup>30</sup> [The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries.](#) International Committee of the Red Cross.

<sup>31</sup> Pietromarchi, V. (2023, September 23). [What lies ahead for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh?](#) Al Jazeera.

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2023, September 19). [Statement by Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defense.](#)

groups “must raise the white flag, surrender all weapons, and the illegal regime must dissolve itself.” Otherwise, they warned, incapacitation measures will be “continued until the end.”<sup>33</sup>

Olesya Vartanyan, an analyst who assesses the region for the International Crisis Group, said there were thousands of people in Nagorno-Karabakh who could not decide what to do: hide in their basements, stay at Russian peacekeeping bases and observation points, or try to flee the region. “People are in panic and the humanitarian situation there is horrendous,” she said.<sup>34</sup>

As the residents panicked, the de facto government of the Nagorno-Karabakh did, indeed, surrender, citing no alternative.<sup>35</sup> After a nearly 30-year bid for independence, the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh agreed to disband its government and armed forces in the aftermath of the latest attack.

**On 20 September, President Ilham Aliyev addressed his nation, congratulating Azerbaijan on “regain[ing] its sovereignty”**, He said, “Azerbaijan [had] duly punished the enemy by immediately taking necessary steps. Local antiterrorist measures were started, and all pending objectives were completed in one day.” Promising to create “a paradise” for Armenians in Karabakh, Aliyev asserted that they could “finally breathe a sigh of relief,”<sup>36</sup> but few in Nagorno-Karabakh were persuaded.<sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> Instead, families started looking for ways to flee as quickly as they could, not knowing how long the Lachin corridor would stay open.

In a tragic turn of events, hundreds faced additional hardships on the road. According to the de facto leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh, free fuel was to be provided for all those who wanted to leave the territory starting from Monday, 25 September. Shortages of essential supplies, including fuel, which had occurred during the blockade meant that filling stations became overwhelmed by people seeking to evacuate, ultimately culminating in yet another tragedy. On the **evening of September 25**, in **Berkadzor near Stepanakert** (roughly 35 kms from the Armenian border), **a deadly explosion** killed approximately 200 people, leaving hundreds more wounded.

## Displacement Overview: What are the numbers?

In the last few months, as a result of above-mentioned regional hostilities, Armenia has experienced an increased influx of people fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh. While the Government of Armenia has stayed deeply involved in the process of registering displaced people, actively collaborating with humanitarian organizations to provide smooth aid-provision to crisis-affected communities, coverage of such a high number of needs remains an overwhelming task. **From the start of**

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<sup>33</sup> Lister, T., Mezzofiore, G., Edwards, C., Chernova, A., & Walsh, N. P. (2023, September 20). [Azerbaijan launches operation against Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh](#). CNN.

<sup>34</sup> Nechepurenko, I. (2023, September 21). [After surrender in Nagorno-Karabakh, leaders discuss Armenians' fate](#). The New York Times.

<sup>35</sup> As cited in *Genocide Watch* (2023).

<sup>36</sup> *President of the Republic of Azerbaijan*. (2023, September 20). [Ilham Aliyev addressed the nation](#).

<sup>37</sup> Nechepurenko, I. (2023, September 21). [After surrender in Nagorno-Karabakh, leaders discuss Armenians' fate](#). The New York Times.

<sup>38</sup> Kucera, J. (2023, December 22). [Despite the warm welcome, Karabakh refugees in Armenia are struggling, unsure where to go next](#). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

hostilities in September 2023 until 7 February 2024, the Govt. of Armenia has registered over 115,000 displaced persons from Karabakh.<sup>39</sup>

These individuals arriving in Armenia are now in desperate need of emergency assistance for both urgent needs like food, and necessities like bedding, medicine, mental health care and psychosocial support. The forced mass departure has only exacerbated many illnesses or cases of malnutrition. Some of the most vulnerable or eldest of the group died along the way.

A layer that adds further complexity to aid provision in Armenia is the diversity in needs of refugees and asylum seekers from regions other than Nagorno-Karabakh. Riddled with the challenges of its own poverty and geopolitical tensions, Armenia has limited capacity to interact with crises taking place elsewhere. As such, the increased influx of displaced people arriving from Karabakh has put a strain on existing state systems in Armenia, and ultimately resulted in little attention being paid to the needs of the displaced people of ‘other’ regions of origin, i.e., those who are not from Karabakh.

According to UNHCR end-year population totals,<sup>40</sup> there were 35,385 forcibly displaced people living in Armenia, as of mid-2023. This number includes 531 stateless persons, 628 asylum seekers and 34,757 refugees. Since the start of renewed hostilities in September 2023, an additional 115,183 people from Nagorno-Karabakh were registered by the Government of Armenia.

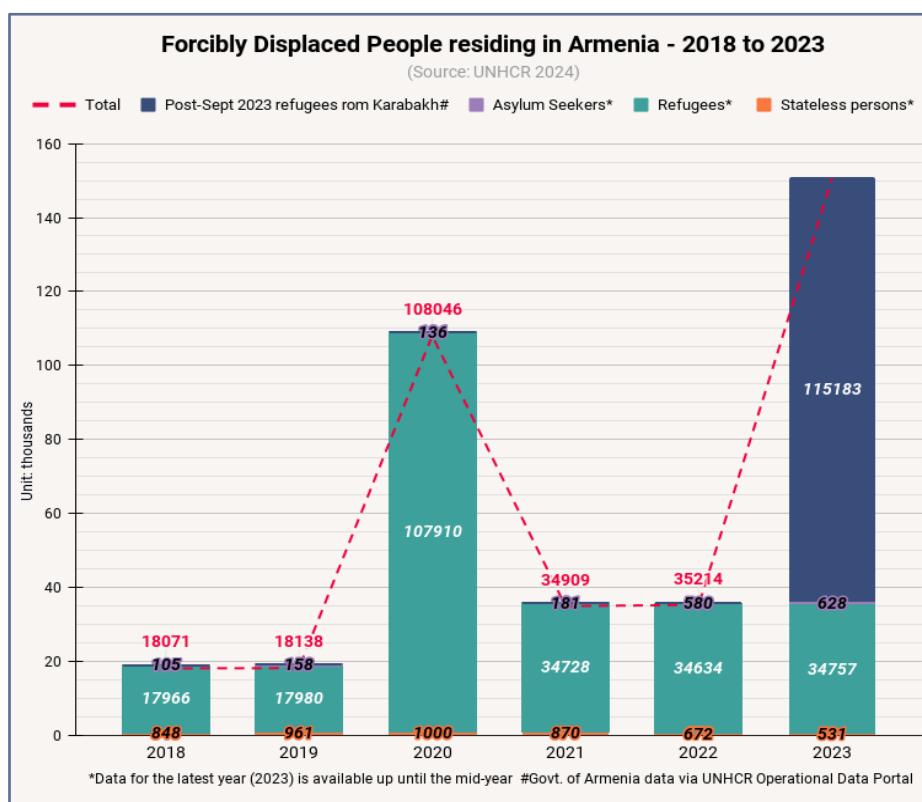


Figure 2 [Source; UNHCR via HDX & Operational Data Portal]

<sup>39</sup> Data from [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#). Last available update at the time of writing – 7 February, 2024

<sup>40</sup> [Data on forcibly displaced populations and stateless persons - End-year stock population figures for forcibly displaced and stateless persons residing in Armenia](#) - Humanitarian Data Exchange. Last available update at the time of writing - 31 October, 2023.

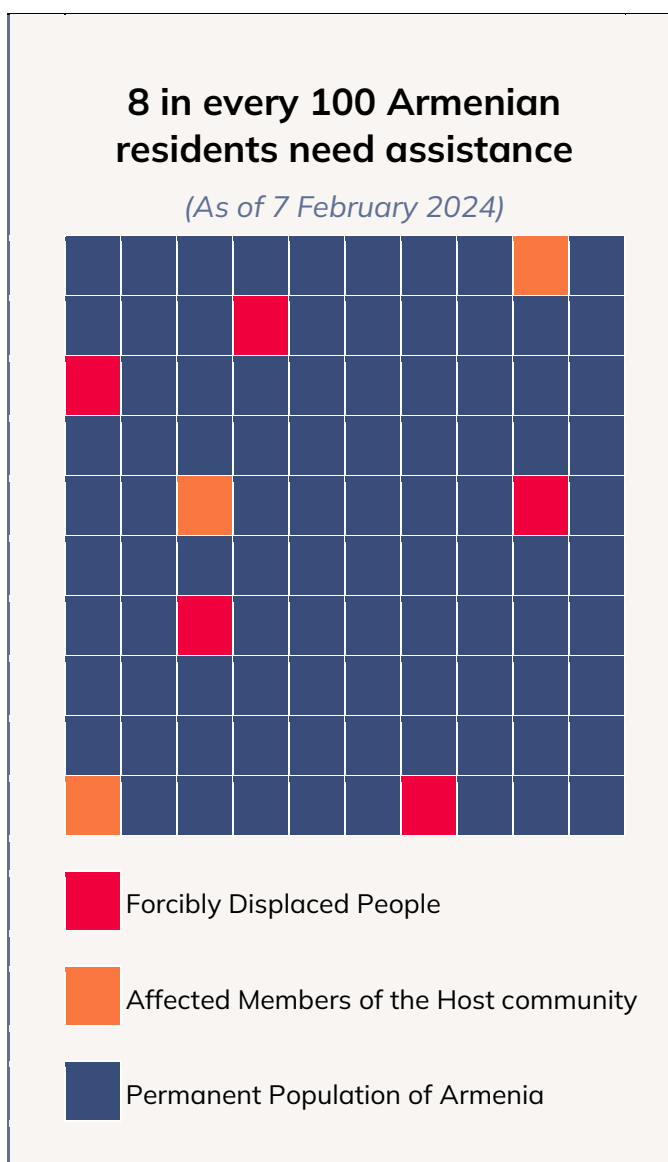


## Armenian Context

In the 2023 census report released by ARMSTAT<sup>41</sup>, Armenia's permanent population is recorded just below 3 million (2,977,130) individuals. This statistic, in light of the numbers from the previous section, reveals a notable reality: **every 21st person presently residing in Armenia has experienced forced displacement**. Although Armenians - both the government and private local individuals - have made commendable efforts to well-absorb the incoming population, especially considering the country's modest size and relatively limited resources, concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the current situation are widespread.

According to a UNICEF report<sup>42</sup> concerning humanitarian plans for the upcoming months, people from Karabakh are currently staying within host communities. Many are staying with their families, friends or in government-provided accommodations. While generously hosting arriving populations, local communities are often themselves dependent on social assistance, further exacerbating their own vulnerabilities. Given the substantial size of the incoming population in comparison to the national population, service provision will likely become strained, making it imperative to ensure key services remain functional for everyone, including host communities. Specifically, in the context of children, UNICEF had estimated 43 refugee children per 1,000 national children, in November already. This number has since expected to have grown.

The Armenian government underscores that, "the influx of refugees has been so large that the lives of host communities, who are already overstretched, have been deeply affected in many ways."<sup>43</sup> They estimate that **around 95,000 people from host communities will require support**. The World Food Program (WFP), similarly, raised concerns regarding the country's vulnerability to external shocks.<sup>44</sup>



<sup>41</sup> ARMSTAT - Statistical Committee of Republic of Armenia. (2023). [The Demographic Handbook of Armenia](#).

<sup>42</sup> UNICEF. (2023, October 1). [Humanitarian Action for Children Multi-year 2023-2024 - Armenia](#).

<sup>43</sup> As cited in UNICEF (2023).

<sup>44</sup> World Food Programme. (2024, February 25). [Armenia Country Brief - January 2024](#).

After people who were displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh following the renewed escalations in 2023, the five largest groups of asylum seekers and refugees are from:

- Azerbaijan (including individuals who have fled from Nagorno-Karabakh) = 27904 (27899 refugees and 5 asylum seekers)
- Syrian Arab Republic = 4921 (4896 refugees and 25 asylum seekers)
- Iraq = 1348 (1146 refugees and 202 asylum seekers)
- Ukraine = 588 (518 refugees and 70 asylum seekers)
- Islamic Republic of Iran = 302 (160 refugees and 142 asylum seekers)

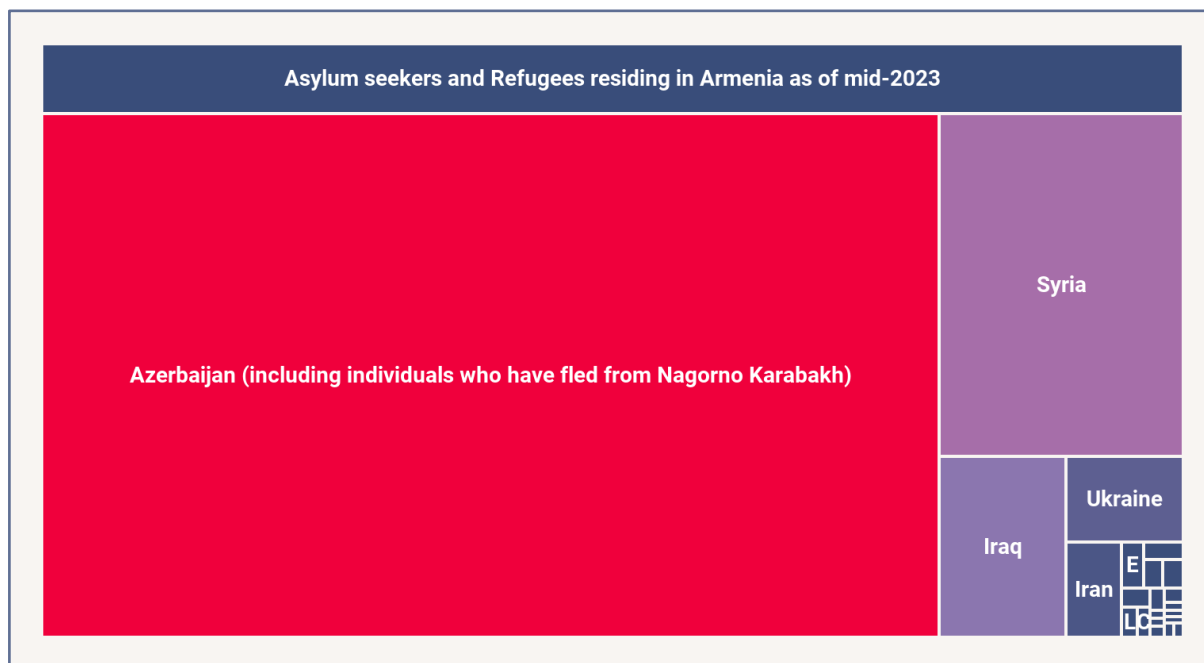


Figure 3 [source: UNHCR via HDX]

Considering the above-mentioned numbers then, around 8% people residing in Armenia are currently in need of support, and a systematic approach is required to ensure wide-reaching coverage of all vulnerable groups. At the same time, considering the freshness of the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, urgency is mounting as people's needs grow exponentially every day.

## Identified Needs

It is essential to note that people who have left Nagorno-Karabakh came to Armenia with very few possessions and little financial capital. Many had no time to prepare. Many others had not much to begin with, in light of the months-long blockade which preceded the military actions. Some others had intentionally left supplies behind for others. Among these 'others,' for example, was an elderly cancer patient, Susanna, who had been found in a fourth-floor apartment building "alone and unable to get out of her bed," according to UN News.<sup>45</sup> The report suggests, "Neighbors had left her food and water several days beforehand, but their supplies were running out."

Marco Succi, ICRC Head of Rapid Deployment, in speaking of Stepanakert on 3 October 2023, said "The city [was] completely deserted. [...] The scene [was] quite surreal." He reported "Many people

<sup>45</sup> UN News. (2023, October 3). [Karabakh: Humanitarians respond to growing health needs.](#)

left their houses and shops open for those who may be in need,” mentioning how an elderly lady had cleaned her fridge and house, “leaving the door open to ventilate the house, you know, for the newcomers.”<sup>46</sup>

Among those who did have some resources to bring, almost all of them used it up on their unusually long and difficult journeys to Armenia. Report<sup>47</sup> from AAH informs:

*When Anoush was forced to flee her home on September 26, she only had time to bring three things—the last of her onions and potatoes and a few winter coats. She left with her husband and her son and traveled for two days before reaching Goris. They had nothing to eat, and out of desperation, asked people in passing cars for water to survive the long trek.*

*Nora fled the conflict on September 25 with her whole family—her grandmother, aunt, niece, newborn cousin, mother, father, husband, sisters, and brother. They arrived three days later in Goris. For the last two days of their journey, they had nothing to eat. They were forced to resort to drinking water from lakes and rivers in the surrounding mountains. Throughout the entire trip, Nora said that no one was able to sleep for even one hour.*

*Armine and Sasun were forced to flee Nagorno-Karabakh on Sep. 26 with barely any notice. Their apartment was completely destroyed by the war. They were on the road for two days and only had one loaf of bread to share between them.*

## Food

These challenging circumstances have created significant risks for the health and well-being of all residents of Armenia - impacting refugees and vulnerable members of the host community alike. According to information<sup>48</sup> published by AAH, even before the substantial influx from Nagorno-Karabakh, hunger in Armenia was a pressing issue. The report, released on 22 September 2023, highlighted that 35% of people in rural regions were food insecure, and 27% of the overall population in Armenia lived in poverty. Additionally, the report indicated that malnutrition is pervasive, particularly in rural areas, and attributed hunger to various factors such as the war in Ukraine, escalating food prices, heightened political instability and conflict, and gender inequality. At the time of report release, the 2020 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh had already forced scores of people to flee to Armenia, further straining an already fragile economy.

According to WFP’s fifth Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment conducted in January 2023,<sup>49</sup> **nearly a third (30%) of Armenian households are food insecure.** Concurrently, the latest information from National Statistical Service data indicated that the poverty rate in Armenia reached 24.8% in 2022.

Regrettably, upon their arrival in Armenia, the people from Nagorno-Karabakh were already grappling with malnutrition, due to the prolonged blockade they had endured. Before the blockade,

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<sup>46</sup> UN News. (2023, October 3).

<sup>47</sup> Bernal Arellano, E., & Patterson, K. (2023). AAH.

<sup>48</sup> Action Against Hunger. (2023, September 22). [Armenia Country Page](#).

<sup>49</sup> World Food Programme. (2023, July 31). [Food security and vulnerability Assessment in Armenia](#).

90% of Karabakh's food was imported from Armenia.<sup>50</sup> Due to being cut-off from Armenia for several months, Genocide Watch reported that Karabakh had depleted essential supplies like flour for bread, stores had no baby formula left and one in three deaths was due to malnutrition.<sup>51</sup> This dire situation persisted and significantly impacted the health and well-being of the displaced persons as they sought safety in Armenia. UNICEF has also observed that many children appear to show signs of malnourishment, with reports of cases of low birth weight.<sup>52</sup>

Notably, **humanitarian aid, including government assistance, was identified as the primary source of food for those displaced.** Local markets with cash transactions also played a substantial role, along with assistance from the community, family, and friends. According to the November Interagency RNA,<sup>53</sup> the majority of KIs (68 in total) reported that people in their communities did, in fact, have food needs. This is troubling, considering that Armenia, according to the WFP,<sup>54</sup> is a "net food-importing country vulnerable to external shocks." As such, there might be a need for external intervention in the form of food assistance or multi-purpose cash assistance to cover essential needs like food and rent.

## Shelter

While Armenians have demonstrated remarkable generosity in the months following escalations in Karabakh, the aid to newcomers has strained the state budget. This has raised concerns about potential resource shortages, especially for the most vulnerable locals who were already living below the poverty line. Experts have also warned of a potential surge in homelessness, expressing fears that although Armenian solidarity has been unwavering to date, compassion fatigue could set in, if living conditions deteriorate.<sup>55</sup>

Concerningly, housing was already identified as a critical issue in an analysis<sup>56</sup> published by People in Need (PIN). This community-level needs assessment involved a survey of 165 beneficiaries and key informants from various communities including Syunik (Goris and Tegh), Ararat (Masis), and Kotayk (Charencavan and Hrazdan). Though the assessment also addressed other sectoral needs, needs related to shelter are particularly enlightening.

When asked about their living arrangements, an overwhelming **majority (72.1%) of respondents, revealed that they were living in rental accommodations.** Following that, a significant 18.2% of participants disclosed that they share their living space with friends or relatives. Additionally, 1.8% reported residing with non-relatives without any financial obligation, and another 1.8% reported being in transitional accommodation, such as shelters. Several reasons contribute to living in shared accommodations, including familial ties and the need to reduce expenses. Another factor may be the challenge of finding appropriate housing. According to PIN, among those attempting to rent, **78% failed to secure a suitable apartment.** Reasons cited include financial barriers, high demand, limited housing options meeting minimum living standards, and regional housing shortages, among

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<sup>50</sup> Mourenza, A. (2023, April 5). [The siege on Nagorno-Karabakh tightens, increasing tension in the Caucasus.](#) EL PAÍS English.

<sup>51</sup> Genocide Watch (2023, September 21). [Genocide Alert: Artsakh surrenders to Azerbaijan.](#)

<sup>52</sup> UNICEF Armenia Humanitarian Situation [Report No. 1](#), (2023, October 2) & [Report No. 2](#) (2023, October 9)

<sup>53</sup> [Rapid needs assessment 3 November 2023.](#) (2023, November 13).

<sup>54</sup> World Food Programme. (2024).

<sup>55</sup> Vartanyan, O. (2024, March 4). [Armenia Struggles to Cope with Exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh.](#) International Crisis Group.

<sup>56</sup> People in Need. (2023, December). [Refugee Crisis in Armenia Rapid Needs Assessment Report.](#)

others. A small, but notable, portion of respondents (5.5%) also indicated that they lived in a house they owned.

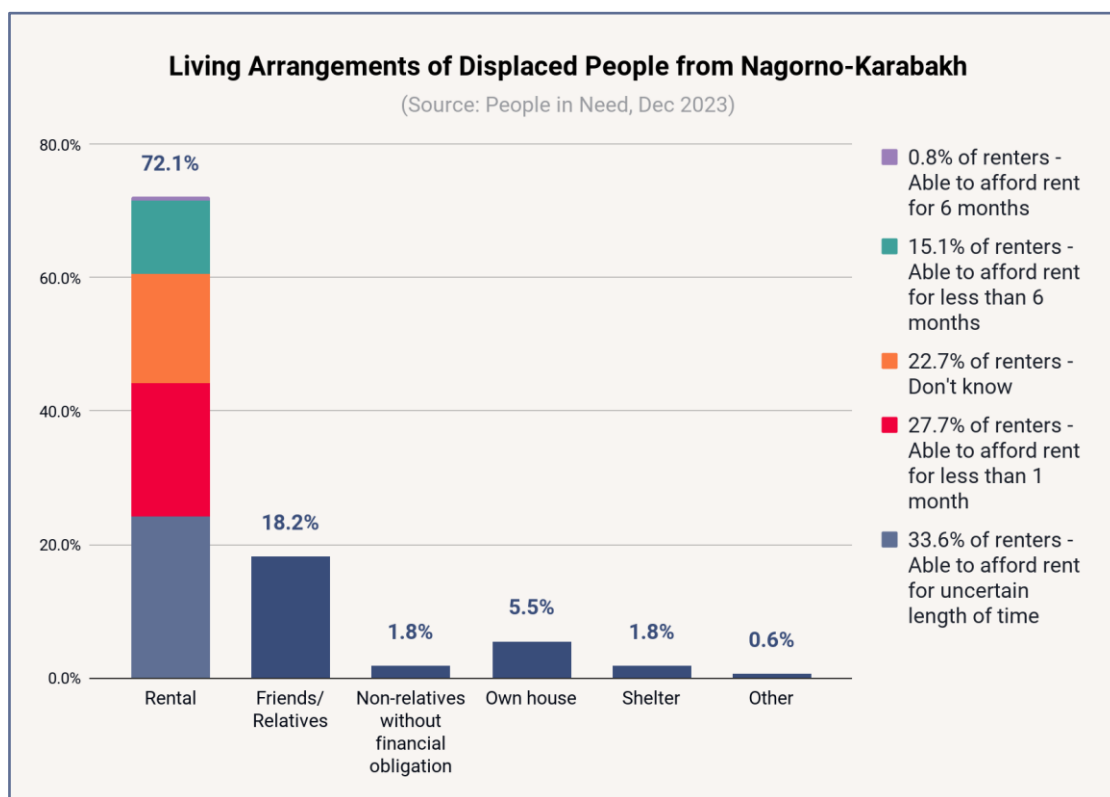


Figure 4 [Source: People in Need Rapid Needs Assessment, Dec 2023]

Upon further exploration regarding ability to cover rent, **only a marginal 0.8% of those who rent their living space expressed confidence in their ability to sustain rental payments for a duration of six months.** Meanwhile, all others expressed that they were either only able to continue paying rent for less than 6 months or expressed outright uncertainty regarding their ability to keep covering rent. This finding is alarming as it sheds light on the immediate financial pressures faced by a significant portion of respondents.

Although everyday Armenians are doing their best to play their part in addressing these housing challenges, this is a large-scale, systemic issue that will need methodical intervention through collaboration between international humanitarian actors and the local government. In September, as Karabakh residents started arriving in Armenia, the government moved swiftly to register them and transfer them to parts of the country where local authorities had housing available. However, as time has passed, the vast majority of refugees have gravitated towards the capital, attracted by the prospect of better employment opportunities. **As of February 2024, almost half have settled in Yerevan<sup>57</sup> and additional 30% are in the vicinity, where local authorities say there are far more refugees than available housing.<sup>58</sup>**

<sup>57</sup> UNHCR. (2024, March 4). [Armenia Situation: Overview of Refugee Population.](#)

<sup>58</sup> Vartanyan, O. (2024). *International Crisis Group.*



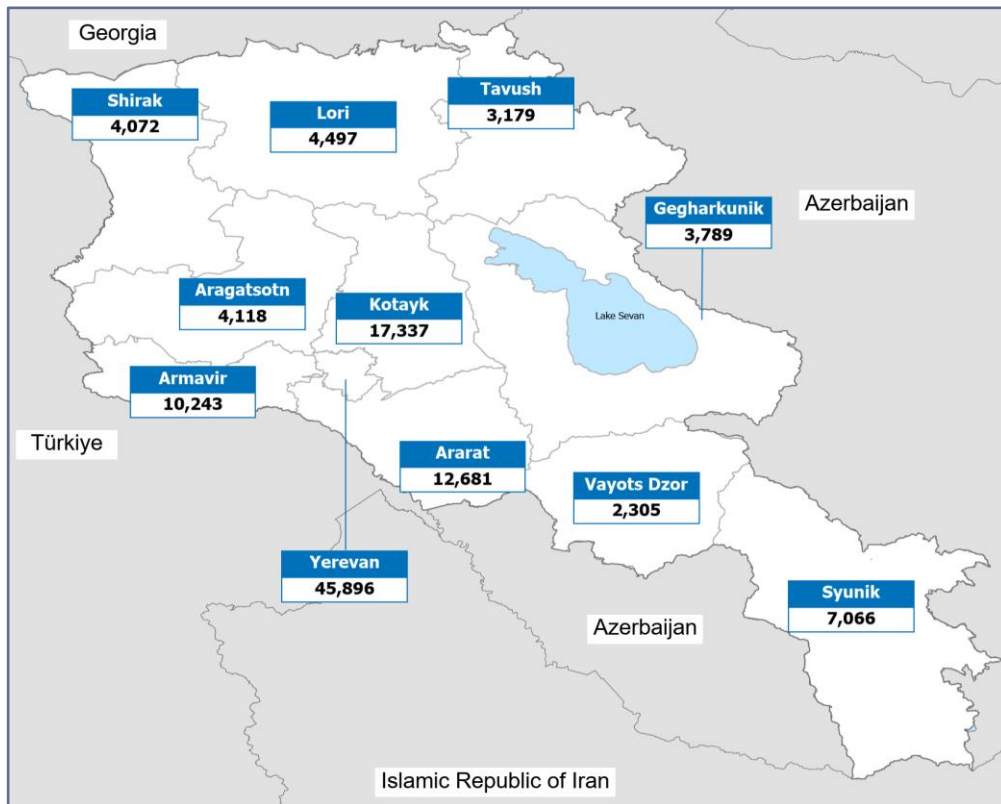


Figure 5: Geographic Distribution of former Karabakh residents in Armenia as of February 2024  
 [Source: UNHCR, Published March 2024]

The International Crisis Group has reported<sup>59</sup> that in the town of Masis, for example, which is a 20-minute drive from the capital, many local officials had to temporarily vacate their offices so that the people from Karabakh could move in. Kindergartens, libraries, and schools have also been repurposed as living spaces. Locals estimate that 11,500 people — almost 10% of Nagorno-Karabakh’s previous Armenian population — have arrived in Masis, nearly doubling the number of residents.

In light of these needs **the government has devised plans<sup>60</sup> to prioritize housing for people displaced from Karabakh.** Though the cost of providing suitable housing remains a formidable challenge.<sup>61</sup> According to government estimates,<sup>62</sup> building a small house near the main town in Kotayk will cost at least USD20,000 per family. While there are some affordable options in sparsely populated regions of Armenia, few wish to relocate there. Vardenis, for instance, a region bordering Azerbaijan, offers significantly affordable housing, with a village house ready to move in priced around USD5,000. One of the reasons for the price being low, however, is that Vardenis has become the most dangerous area along the border, with frequent skirmishes between the Armenian and Azerbaijani militaries.

<sup>59</sup> Vartanyan, O. (2024). International Crisis Group.

<sup>60</sup> The Government of the Republic of Armenia. (2024, March 1). [A state support program for housing affordability is planned for persons forcibly displaced from Nagorno Karabakh.](#)

<sup>61</sup> Vartanyan, O. (2024). International Crisis Group.

<sup>62</sup> As cited in Vartanyan, O. (2024). International Crisis Group.

For people from Nagorno-Karabakh, still grappling with the trauma of forced displacement, Vardenis is hardly appealing. A town official said,

*“Refugees would get off the buses halfway when they learned the government was sending them to Vardenis; no one want[s] to live at gunpoint again.”*

Approximately 800 Karabakh Armenians have arrived in the region,<sup>63</sup> only a tenth of the number local officials had planned for. “These are the poorest, who had no choice”, a humanitarian worker said. Sources indicate that state housing policy is set to implement changes starting from March 2024, shifting away from rent subsidies in favour of providing longer-term support for purchasing or constructing homes. **In the upcoming weeks, the government plans to provide approximately USD7,400 per person<sup>64</sup> to each family with more than two children to buy or build a house.**

### Health and Mental Wellbeing

The Inter-agency RNA<sup>65</sup> published by UNHCR revealed that most key informants (KIs) were aware of individuals in their community who have specific protection needs. Additionally, 59 KIs highlighted individuals with serious medical conditions, and 58 KIs pointed out older people without family support. A total of 55 KIs identified individuals in need of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

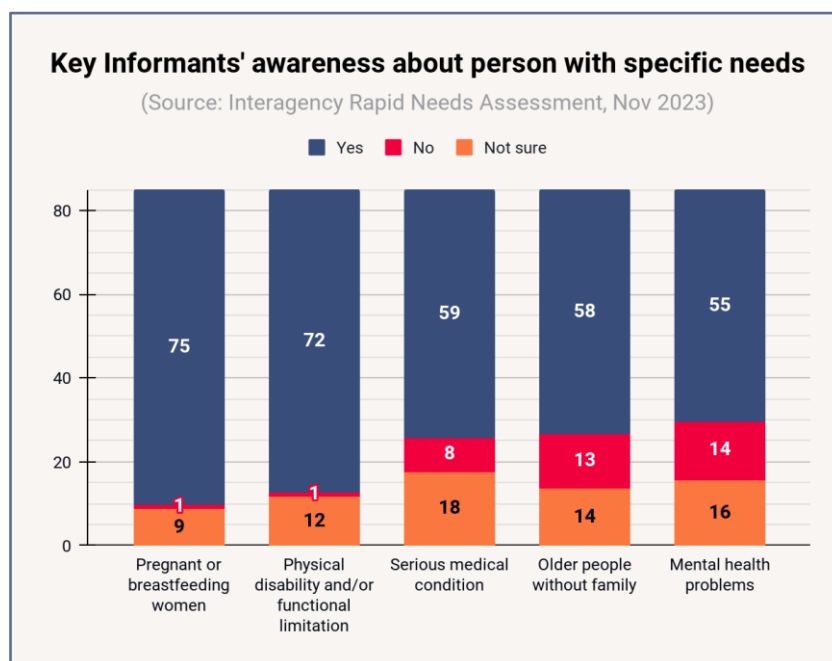


Figure 6 [Source: Interagency Rapid Needs Assessment, Nov 2023]

Similar concerns were raised by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, as they stated that as of 19 October 2023, there were an **estimated 2,070 pregnant women among the people who had arrived from Karabakh.** Nearly

<sup>63</sup> Vartanyan, O. (2024). International Crisis Group.

<sup>64</sup> Badalian, S., & Kaghzvantsian, S. (2024, March 1). [Government criticized over 'Inadequate' housing scheme for Karabakh refugees.](#) «Ազատ Եվրոպա/Ազատություն» Ռադիոկայան. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

<sup>65</sup> Interagency RNA. (2023).

120 had given birth since arriving in Armenia, and **approximately 1,380 were expected to give birth in the next 6 months** (by April 2024).<sup>66</sup>

In general, health needs are among the most urgent for the incoming population, given the months of difficulties they have had to endure before the war, as well as immediate needs arising from the military offensive and the fuel pump blast closer to their departure from Nagorno-Karabakh. RNA<sup>67</sup> key informants have indicated chronic health conditions (63 KIs), serious injuries (47), respiratory infections (33), and serious skin diseases (10) being prevalent in their communities.

According to the January-February 2024 Interagency Update,<sup>68</sup> 30 percent of the refugee population (about 30,000 individuals) have still not been registered in the national e-Health system (ARMED), thus lacking access to healthcare provided by the Government of Armenia. RNA key informants have emphasized the urgent need for the expedited registration of displaced persons in the national e-health system to ensure access to state-provided healthcare.

The update also highlighted that the health needs of longer-term refugee populations, including **burn management and rehabilitation, will continue to require attention**. In this context, ensuring sufficient provision of specialized health services for individuals with disabilities poses a significant challenge since most of them are concentrated in Yerevan.<sup>69</sup>

Anoush, a trained psychologist who previously worked in Nagorno-Karabakh, shared her insights with AAH:<sup>70</sup>

*“After the blockade started, all that my patients could think about was the situation. There was chaos. Everyone forgot why they were coming to the psychologist in the first place and could only think about the blockade. Before the blockade, I told my patients to look forward to the future. After the blockade, I could not say that anymore. Which future did we have?”*

Many of the newcomers in Armenia have been through very challenging circumstances, not the least of these experiences are the events that took place on the day of the military activity in Nagorno-Karabakh. A 25-year-old mother of two, pregnant with her third child, was at home when she heard the sounds of bombs falling. She told UNFPA<sup>71</sup> what she experienced was horrible:

*“It was a real-life nightmare. My elder son was at school, the younger one at the kindergarten [...] I didn't know which way to run, whom to save first. It was just horrible.”*

16-year-old Mariam, from Martakert, described her experience similarly stating:

*“I didn't even know whether my parents were alive or not. It was a very difficult time,”*

Even before during the 2022-23 blockade, Amnesty International reported that 1,100 residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, including at least 270 children, were left stranded outside the region and

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<sup>66</sup> UNFPA EECA. (2023, November 7). [Refugee Response in Armenia Situation Report #2](#).

<sup>67</sup> Interagency RNA. (2023).

<sup>68</sup> [Armenia Inter-Agency Operational Update #12 - 22 January – 5 February 2024](#). (2024, February 19).

<sup>69</sup> Armenia Inter-Agency (2024).

<sup>70</sup> Bernal Arellano, E., & Patterson, K. (2023). AAH.

<sup>71</sup> United Nations Population Fund. (2023, November 1). [Carving out a New Life in Armenia](#).

unable to return home.<sup>72</sup> Anxieties related to these experiences may resurface in the minds of displaced people as they look for normalcy in their new environment, especially younger individuals like Mariam, who told UNFPA,<sup>73</sup> “I miss my home.”

In line with recent **estimates<sup>74</sup> by the World Health Organization, nearly 22,500 people in Armenia are expected to experience a mental health condition and will need dedicated mental health services.** Unfortunately, the Interagency RNA confirmed the opposite, however, stating that professional mental health and psychosocial support services were lacking in all communities. Therefore, the need for the continuation of MHPSS interventions has become more urgent, especially as displaced people progress towards meeting their basic priority needs such as shelter and food. MHPSS, including psychological first aid for non-specialized health personnel, is expected to be increasingly necessary in the upcoming months.

UNICEF has also observed that children who fled their homes and communities have faced trauma. Those with specific protection needs, including unaccompanied and separated children, children in institutional care, and those with disabilities, are particularly vulnerable.

### Cash and Livelihoods

The Interagency update for January and February<sup>75</sup> underscored the importance of prioritizing cash support in Armenia, especially for individuals with specific needs such as severe medical conditions or disabilities. The goal of this emphasis is to enhance refugee access to specialized medical services and assistive devices. While this approach would certainly help, considering that many refugee needs could possibly be addressed through a well-managed cash assistance program, there is uncertainty regarding the initiation of another program after the current one involving cash for rent and utilities ending in March 2024.

Direct discussions with UNHCR Armenia representatives have also indicated that the current Refugee Response Plan, valid until March, is unlikely to be extended. This creates a critical juncture as many from Karabakh, despite their desire to return home, may not be able to do so in the foreseeable future. As such their long-term presence necessitates a strategic shift in addressing the livelihood and sustenance needs of displaced populations. Building resilience among displaced individuals could entail **concentrated effort on job placement, self-employment opportunities, and the provision of income-generating tools, particularly in the agricultural sector.**

**The lack of comprehensive data on displaced people and their ongoing mobility presents a significant challenge in tailoring effective livelihood support programs.** According to the interagency update, an IOM Labour Survey is currently underway, complemented by the compilation of MSNA data. To develop context-specific activities for livelihood support and integration, WFP has also initiated an analysis of barriers and opportunities for socio-economic integration. These results will hopefully fill the gap for robust information and pave the way for designing impactful interventions supporting job creation, income generation, and overall economic resilience.

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<sup>72</sup> Amnesty International (2023).

<sup>73</sup> United Nations Population Fund. (2023, October 11). [“I miss my home”: Fleeing conflict, tens of thousands of women and girls cross into Armenia.](#)

<sup>74</sup> World Health Organization. (2023, November 10). [“With a little help, everybody here can move on. Nobody is hopeless.” Scaling up mental health and psychosocial services for Armenian refugees.](#)

<sup>75</sup> Armenia Inter-Agency (2024).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The preceding sections have provided an overview of the available information concerning the needs of refugees and other crisis-affected groups in the Republic of Armenia. Drawing from the findings of this SDR, we recommend further data collection, particularly focusing on the needs of potential beneficiaries not from Nagorno-Karabakh.

For future actions, we propose the following recommendations:

- In order to foster self-reliance through integration into local labour markets, there needs to be a methodical mapping of displaced individuals' skills and potential labour demand, followed by the provision of necessary vocational training or upskilling activities. This approach would allow beneficiaries to generate income during the transitional phase of settlement while accommodating their continued mobility, thereby addressing not only the most immediate economic needs but also laying the groundwork for sustained resilience, self-sufficiency, and successful integration into the local economy.
- Measures combining sustenance and livelihood approaches are highly encouraged, especially through low-effort technology-assisted farming. Engaging in daily farming activities would not only allow displaced people to feel a sense of purpose and routine after a chaotic period in their lives, but the products resulting from farming activities could also contribute to addressing food insecurity within the community.
- Recognizing the importance of cross-sectional socioeconomic empowerment, there is a need to prioritize programs that uplift women and people with disabilities by removing barriers to employment. This could include, for example, actions ensuring access to childcare, transportation, and other necessities.
- Addressing the nutritional needs of all communities, especially pregnant women, children, and those with exacerbated health conditions, is extremely crucial given past experiences of the blockade. These immediate needs could be met through direct cash assistance, cash for medical expenses, and/or in-kind food assistance through localized partnerships.
- Discussions with actors on the ground revealed that families arriving from Nagorno-Karabakh tend to be larger, often with several children and multiple generations forming part of the same household. As such, hygiene needs of women, children, and the elderly remain a top need. In order to fulfil this need, providing basic personal care items through direct cash assistance or local partners is recommended.
- Incentive measures for businesses actively supporting gainful employment or professional practice of displaced persons can contribute significantly to their economic empowerment, while providing a pathway for businesses to, for example, reach their CSR goals.
- Providing regional support beyond the capital region is advocated to address the needs of those living outside the region and to prevent overcrowding of service centres in Yerevan.
- Critical for the well-being of children and young people is their active involvement in sports, cultural, or educational activities throughout Armenia. These activities contribute not only to better mental and physical health but may also offer parents, especially primary caretakers, the opportunity to pursue employment or develop their businesses as caregiving responsibilities may decrease.



- Recognizing the pressing demand for mental health and psychosocial support services among the incoming population, it is crucial to adopt nuanced approaches to meet these needs. At this point, community-level group sessions emerge as an optimal solution, providing beneficiaries with a sense of belonging and solidarity with others who have faced similar challenges. These group-based approaches also offer the advantage of reaching larger numbers of displaced persons within a shorter time frame, which may be ideal given the scale and urgency of mental health needs. Some such initiatives could encompass counselling focus groups, social gatherings, establishment of "third spaces" for women, as well as art and craft workshops for children or the elderly, among other possibilities.

## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared under the supervision of Eero Janson, Director of the Estonian Refugee Council, with valuable insights from Tatevik Khudinyan (Country Director) and Mijerita Khachatryan (Program Officer) of the Armenian branch of the Estonian Refugee Council. Thanks are due for their feedback and suggestions throughout the process.

We would also like to express our sincere thanks to Kavita Belani, Lusine Sargsyan, and Terra MacKinnon of UNHCR Armenia, Silja Kasmann of DG-NEAR, and Joelle Goire and Massimo La Rossa of DG-ECHO for sharing their thoughts and insights regarding the needs of displaced populations in Armenia. Discussions with them were instrumental in providing a nuanced understanding of the unique on-the-ground aspects of the humanitarian situation in the region.



**ESTONIAN  
REFUGEE  
COUNCIL**

MTÜ Eesti Pagulasabi  
Rüütli 4, Tartu 51007 Estonia  
Vambola 6, Tallinn 10114 Estonia  
27 Sayat-Nova Ave, Yerevan 0010 Armenia

[info@pagulasabi.ee](mailto:info@pagulasabi.ee)  
[www.pagulasabi.ee](http://www.pagulasabi.ee)