

## **Karabakh: Farmers in Survival Struggle**

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War and poverty have made life increasingly difficult in the breakaway republic of Nagorny Karabakh

David Abramian, a villager from Nagorny Karabakh's eastern Askeran region, makes no bones about the struggle facing local farmers, "It's every man for himself."

For centuries, Karabakh's rich farmland was famous for its wine, fruit and corn. Yet the heavy rains that lashed the country for most of the spring have stripped the once-fertile land of its bounty.

"If we are lucky with the weather and have the necessary equipment, there will be a harvest and we will not starve," said Abramian, who lives with his family in the village of Astkhashen. "But we have no back-up from any authority or non-governmental organisation."

In April and May the rainfall was around twice the average. Hail struck the grain crops, potato plants and vines of the Askeran region, causing more than 300 million drams - 500,000 US dollars - of damage.

Agriculture was also suffered during the war with Azerbaijan, and it has not flourished since the end of the conflict in 1994, when Karabakh came under Armenian control.

In the Seventies, the region produced 100,000 tons of grain. It now struggles to grow a third of that. And where it once boasted a tonne of grapes per head of population, now only a fraction of this amount hangs on the vine.

"Perhaps around five per cent of the 130 households here are able to farm and receive a steady income from the harvest," said Abramian.

When the republic privatised the land, he was assigned 12 hectares. However, the farmers are expected to pay for the use of equipment they do not own, pushing up the cost of harvesting - and making it harder earn a profit.

The agriculture ministry sees the solution in a consolidation programme, where farms are merged to form larger, more profitable units. It's a return to the collectives of the past, most of which did not survive the war or its aftermath.

"Excessive speed and a slapdash approach to the privatisation process, which began immediately after the ceasefire in 1994, led to many collective farms breaking up," said agriculture minister Benik Bakhshian.

"Shared property and equipment was split up, while the farmers - who did not have any entrepreneurial skills - were in no state to do good business."

Karabakh's whole environment has suffered over the past fifteen years. The famous forests were hit hard before and during the war, and the government has recently taken steps to tackle this problem.

"From 1988 to 1995 the forest was being felled practically without control," said Yaroslav Gasparian, a forester in charge of the woods of the Martuni region. "But since 1996, thanks to the efforts of the authorities and in particular the forestry authority of the republic, there is more protection. Trees are being classified and fines imposed for unlawful felling."

There is also concern about rivers and streams, as most which have their source in Nagorny Karabakh dry out in the summer and are not replenished by rainwater. The country's irrigation infrastructure was practically destroyed during the war, and this has left most farmers at the mercy of the elements.

The government has devised a new irrigation programme but there are fears that its estimated cost - 100 million dollars - will be well beyond its capacity. Experts believe the problem is exacerbated by Azerbaijan's refusal to cooperate with the Karabakh Armenians.

The local authorities proposed a joint scheme to provide irrigation for regions on both sides of the ceasefire line, and to fight the rodents that plague both peoples. However Baku, which does not recognise the legitimacy of the Karabakh Armenians, refused.

Many of the government's ambitious plans for turning Karabakh's agriculture around will come to nothing without investment. Today, most of the population buys imported food, even though it would prefer local produce. Karabakhis believe this situation will remain unchanged for as long as the international community refuses to recognise the republic.

"International organisations and interested states will not donate aid to improve our situation because Nagorny Karabakh is not recognised," explained Bakhshian. "Only one foreign body, America's Armenian Technological Group, is working here and bringing useful equipment into the republic."

Every little helps, but it is clear that Nagorny Karabakh has a long way to go before the ravages of war can be repaired. However, its farmers remain hopeful in the face of hardship.

"We won't starve yet," said Abramian. "Some stores are left over from last year and we will get through. Our stomachs are not sophisticated - what we need is some potatoes, beans, bread and homemade spirits. In spring we will eat herbs and fresh vegetables, and in winter, conserves and dried fruit."

Until this situation changes, most Karabakh farmers can only look forward to many more years of hand-to-mouth existence.

Ashot Beglarian is a freelance journalist working in Nagorny Karabakh

**Location:** [Karabakh](#)  
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